

**School Leaders' Experiences and Perceptions of  
School Reform in KSA: Autonomy, Accountability  
and Decision Making**

Thesis submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Declaration of Original Authorship**

### **Declaration:**

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Hussain Almalki

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this work to,

My father who was proud of my success

My mother who dedicated her life to my happiness

My dear brothers and sisters

My wife and daughters who supported me and shared with me this mission

My son who came at the end of the journey

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## **Abstract**

Improving educational attainment is a key issue worldwide, with many nations undertaking major educational reform in order to ensure their students can effectively compete in an increasingly global marketplace. Saudi Arabia's education system has traditionally been centralised and tightly controlled by the Saudi Ministry of Education, while people essential to the educational process, such as school leaders, have historically had relatively little influence on the process. However, recent educational reforms suggest that Saudi Arabia may be moving towards a decentralised system of education, which would involve the transfer of decision-making powers to local governments and schools. The vast majority of the literature on school autonomy, however, has been investigated and considered in a Western context, and accordingly there appears to be very little research that has been undertaken in the Arabic context. Thus, this thesis aims to fill the associated gaps in the literature, in this instance with regards to school autonomy in Saudi Arabia. The main purpose of this study is to explore school leaders' perceptions of their capacity to work more independently in the context of national school reform as Saudi Arabia shifts from a centralised to a more decentralised system.

This study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed method. Data collection comprised three phases: the first was a questionnaire that targeted male and female school principals from which there were 146 responses; the second part comprised of interviews with ten school principals; and the third phase involved interviews with five educational experts.

The findings from this study suggest that principals currently have the ability to lead their schools autonomously and make their own decisions, but overall, they recognise that to successfully adapt to a decentralised education system they would need additional and continuing professional development and training. The findings reveal that by giving principals

greater autonomy, accountability and decision-making powers, a significant positive change in school management, student achievement, teacher performance and school environment would result.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of the current educational system on school principals' management roles and their readiness for greater autonomy as the country moves towards decentralisation. The literature discussing autonomy in schools has generally only been researched in a Western context, with very few studies attempting to consider this issue in an Arabic context, including Saudi Arabia, which represents a particular lack given this current period of systematic school reform within the country. Thus, this thesis aims to fill this particular knowledge gap. This chapter provides an overview to the thesis as a whole through the following sections: identification of the problem, research aims and questions, conceptual framework, methodology, significance and outcome of the study, the overview of the thesis and conclusions.

### **1.2 Identifying the Problem**

Improving the quality of education is a particularly significant issue in the majority of countries worldwide. An awareness of the challenges that governments face in reforming education with the ongoing process of globalisation is being increasingly recognised (Wallin, 2003). Some of these challenges are global, while some of them are local. Here, these challenges will be discussed then linked to the research problem. First, globalisation has shaped the role of education, since knowledge is no longer purely sought for greater understanding or the pursuit of truth, but is driven rather by market forces for the production of a Knowledge Economy (Singh, 2004). In consequence, the provision of high-quality education has become increasingly important as it is viewed as the vehicle that can drive a country's economic development and growth (Shields, 2013). In addition, the education system in developing

countries has been affected by international bodies such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the World Bank; furthermore, these countries often adopt educational policies established by developed countries in order to effect – or in the hope of effecting – more rapid economic development (Tan, 2010).

Second, the key local challenge to reforming education is the traditional hierarchical system. In light of globalisation, high customer expectations, and the development and deployment of complex technology, traditional hierarchical power in organisations has arguably become less influential, with workers learning to carry the initiative as required and to take responsibility for their own actions (Quinn & Spreitzer, 1997). Educational management in Saudi Arabia is bureaucratic and centralised. Thus, the continuing lack of performance in terms of both schools' and students' results, despite previous attempts at educational reform, has encouraged researchers and decision makers alike to rethink the effectiveness of these reforms under such a centralised system. For example, Al-Ghamdi and Al-Saddat (2002) emphasised the fact that the bureaucratic system in Saudi Arabia does not encourage the use of initiative. A significant aspect of this problem is the centralised system effectively works as a 'superpower', where local education bureaus and schools do not have any real authority. In another such instance, Aqil (2005) argues that the centralised system leaves local educational authorities in a position where they have no authority and are instead required to follow the instructions of the Ministry of Education. Since education policies are set by the government under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, all major decisions regarding schools are made without reference to, or contribution from, school management. Centralisation represents the attempt to maintain a steady governance within which decisions are made at the highest levels, and lower-level institutes such as schools are merely obliged to implement those decisions. In such a centralised system, central government's focus is on making

decisions about a wide range of matters, thus “leaving only tightly programmed routine implementation to lower levels in the organisation” (Lauglo, 1995, p. 6). Power is otherwise limited, or indeed almost non-existent, and the role of the school principal is one of the pure daily routine.

Another local challenge that faces the government in the light of economic difficulties is that the government has invested considerable financial resources over recent years in order to develop the Saudi education system; however, this spending has fallen somewhat short of the desired results. For example, the Saudi government spent more than 25% of its entire budget on the development of education in 2014 (Almannie, 2015), whilst in 2015 they allocated £37 million to develop education in a variety of ways, such as upgrading schools and universities (General Authority for Statistics, 2017). Another example of educational reform is the Saudi government’s ‘*Tatweer*’ (Development) project. This is also referred to as the King Abdullah Project for Educational Development, as it was established on the instruction of King Abdullah in 2008. *Tatweer* sets out comprehensive plans for the construction of new schools and new ideas to improve the educational environment, such as curriculum development, teacher training and extra-curricular activities (Mathis, 2010).

However, the expected results of this quite considerable expenditure has not been reflected in subsequent educational achievement (Almannie, 2015). For example, students in year eight (students aged 14 years old) scored an average of 394 in the most recent Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study in Mathematics (TIMSS) in 2011; however, the TIMSS average is 500 and, furthermore, scores below 440 are usually interpreted as being “poor” (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010). Another example from Saudi Arabia was described by Alamer (2014), who found that scores in mathematics and science were below the required levels. In addition, Abouammoh (2009) listed the principal challenges facing the



education system in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council, which is the political and economic alliance of six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman) in detail: low performance in terms of international status; non-integration of education processes and curricula; the absence of cultural dimensions in the educational process; lack of preparation and poorly qualified education leaders; low effectiveness of graduates from university; and the limited partnership of educational institutions and their communities. Despite spending considerable amounts of money to develop its education system and to import ideas from the developed nations, there is increasing concern that further spending will not help to reform education without reform of the educational management system itself, as effected through decentralisation.

Decentralisation has been argued to be one of globalisation's solutions to reforming education worldwide. As noted in the Saudi context, there is a clear need for economic and educational reform. Decentralisation was one of the methods of reform intended to minimise costs that emerged in the 1980s, but because of its other advantages has now become an almost global phenomenon (Sen & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). Moreover, decentralisation creates opportunities to finance schools through charitable and local business organisations (Coelho, 2009). In terms of educational reform, Winkler and Yeo (2007) argued that policies designed to increase school autonomy may contribute to improved service delivery, which is common in many parts of the world. Furthermore, cultural, social and political issues require changes, such as the inclusion of the community in the management of education (Kowalczyk & Jakubczak, 2014), therefore, it can be seen that the move towards decentralisation in education, as effected through granting greater autonomy to schools, is one of the most significant reforms that might be undertaken in this regard.

The reason for granting schools greater autonomy is that this represents a key solution to reforming education in countries such as Saudi Arabia; the attention that has been given to the issue of school autonomy since 1980 in developed nations is an indicator that this idea represents a valuable area of research. For example, the Eurydice Unit, whose mandate is to understand and explain how Europe's various education systems are organised and how they work, conducted a study which spanned more than two decades of school autonomy in Europe. The most significant findings of this study were the diversity of the reforms enacted and the manner in which policies varied depending on geographical location, country and time. The study also found that school autonomy is a principle which has grown in Europe over more than two decades. Indeed, this matter was at the heart of educational reforms in the 1980s in countries such as Spain, France and the United Kingdom, and is still of keen interest to countries such as Germany and Luxembourg, who are now in the process of enacting similar changes (Coghlan & Desurmont, 2007).

The focus on granting school principals greater autonomy emerged from their key role in developing school performance. Although there are various factors that may contribute to educational achievement, school principals represent one of the most significant factors affecting the associated outcome, whether positively or negatively. Principals play a significant role in both achieving educational goals and managing the internal processes within schools that facilitate such achievements. Thus, they should be allowed the autonomy to exploit opportunities, take risks and take corrective actions as they arise without the need for reference to higher authority (Jawad, Hussein, & Abdul Salam, 2007). On the other hand, principals of boys' secondary schools in Saudi Arabia face challenges that reduce their motivation for holding their positions (Alkarni, 2014). They need to be granted a degree of decision-making autonomy to enable them to overcome the challenges they typically face

because they are responsible for improving educational approaches and resolving problems (ibid). In fact, being a principal is a huge responsibility that entails strict accountability to high-level authorities and parents. For example, when the school principal makes a mistake, the Ministry of Education acts directly, with the possible result that the principal can be removed from their position. Despite all these responsibilities, “principals are only operational in the schools, with no share in the decision making” (Alkarni, 2014, p. 63).

In addition, granting greater decision-making authority as to how work is performed enhances the creativity of workers because “the most creative employees are the ones who tend towards curiosity and learning, have high cognitive flexibility, are willing to bear risks and are more willing to face everyday obstacles and challenges” (Knight & Turvey, 2006, p. 315). Thus, it can be seen that granting principals greater decision-making powers and autonomy may in turn raise levels of creativity and positively impact student learning and achievement (Rodriguez & Hovde, 2002).

### **1.3 Research aim, objectives and questions**

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of the current educational system on school principals' management roles and their readiness for greater autonomy as the country moves towards decentralisation from three perspectives: decision-making, autonomy and accountability.

The research objectives are:

1. To investigate views of the expected impact of educational reform on the school principals' role in KSA.
2. To explore the readiness of principals to lead schools autonomously.
3. To investigate the expected opportunities and challenges of transferring decision making to schools.
4. To investigate the importance of accountability when shifting decision making to schools.
5. To explore the professional development needs of school principals that are required to support the successful implementation of school autonomy.

To achieve these aims and objectives, five research questions guided the study, namely:

RQ1: What are the main challenges currently facing school principals in the KSA?

RQ2: What are school principals' perceptions of their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making?

RQ3: What are school principals' perceptions of the opportunities that may arise with greater school autonomy in relation to decision making?

RQ4: What are school principals' perceptions of the challenges they may face when implementing school autonomy in relation to decision making and accountability?

RQ5: What additional support and professional development do school principals require for the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA in relation to decision making and accountability?

## **1.4 Conceptual framework**

This research is framed by three main concepts that shape a comprehensive understanding of the possibility of shifting to decentralisation and implementing school autonomy in Saudi Arabia: decision making, autonomy and accountability.

Decision making is essential to educational administration because schools, as with all official organisations, are mainly decision-making structures (Simon, 1997). In addition, Simon indicated that "decision making is the heart of administration" (Simon, 1979, p. 353), and which is indeed one of the principal responsibilities of all managers (Simon, 1997). Placing decision-making authority in the hands of principals thus increases the ability to address teachers' and students' needs and produce better academic results because decisions made by executives (for instance, school principals) and their staff should lead to more informed outcomes (Simon, 1997). The rationale for shifting to decentralisation is thus to give principals greater control over whatever actions they deem necessary to improve performance and, by the same token, to give them greater responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. In other words, the authority to make decisions would shift from central authority to schools in order to empower principals by giving them greater authority over key parts of their operations. This authority can carry varying levels of decision-making responsibility, for instance in relation to staff recruitment, financial management, working conditions, facilities

management, evaluation, curricula, and other aspects of school administration (Zajda & Gamage, 2009).

The second key concept in this research is that of autonomy, which has been adopted in the majority of developed countries for decades because it is seen as a means by which lower managerial levels can deal with routine matters and problems within an appropriate timeframe (Hanson, 1997). Mizrav (2014) argued that increasing autonomy has three key positive effects on a principal's ability to affect school performance. First, autonomy increases the level of commitment, motivation and responsibility that drives principals professionally. Second, they can use their local knowledge and understanding to greater effect when they accept increased decision-making responsibility. Third, principals are willing to accept greater accountability if they are more in control of the decisions that influence school performance.

The third major concept in the current study is accountability, which is one of the vital mechanisms by which to ensure that schools' goals are achieved (Usman, 2016). Accountability refers to a "relationship between an individual who dispenses a service and the recipients of that service" (Seyfarth, 1999, p. 103). The importance of integrating accountability into educational management processes is the concomitant improvement in service delivery and control over discipline in the organisation, which in turn leads to increased performance (Usman, 2016). Moreover, the emphasis on improving performance and accountability has become important within educational initiatives (Stecher et al., 2004). Principals should be accountable for all funding received, school facilities, the actions of every member of their organisation, and the accomplishment of goals (Okoroma, 2007). Thus, principals should recognise accountability in education as being an essential element of the school framework (Nakpodia & Okiemute, 2011) and of their own professional responsibility.

It is hoped that this framework will provide new theoretical insights into the phenomena under exploration in this thesis. This framework is developed in more detail in Chapter Four.

## **1.5 Methodology**

The purpose of this section is to briefly highlight the methodology used in this study. The study used an explanatory sequential mixed method, where the researcher first conducts quantitative research, analyses the findings, and then builds on the results to explain them in more detail through further, qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Thus, I first conducted a survey of a total of 300 male and female school principals, from which I received 146 responses, in which I asked about their capability to manage schools autonomously, the impact of school autonomy on education management and outcomes for pupils, and the challenges that may be faced with the implementation of school autonomy. Then, after analysing the survey data, the interview questions were developed. Semi-structured interviews (face-to-face) were then conducted in two phases: the first with ten male school principals, and the second with five educational experts. The context of the study was Saudi Arabia, in which the survey targeted four main cities (Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam and Jizan), while the interview focussed on two cities (Riyadh and Sabia). More details in this regard will be presented in Chapter five.

## **1.6 Significance and outcomes of the study**

Recently, the reformation of education in KSA has included two developed school projects: the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz's Public Education Development Project (*Tatweer*) and the New Vision; however, there is still the need to continually address strategies that can operationalise new policies in the Kingdom (Khalil & Karim, 2016). Therefore, this study makes

a major contribution towards the new strategies by demonstrating the readiness to adopt decentralisation and shift responsibility for decision making to schools.

Although the Ministry of Education decided to implement autonomy in certain schools (MoE, 2017), the actual nature of autonomy remains unclear. It is still not known whether school autonomy represents a suitable means by which to reform education in Saudi Arabia or otherwise, and a number of questions in the current literature remain unanswered in relation to the study context. Therefore, this study provides new insights into the steps required to grant schools full decision-making autonomy.

The school principal has a strong influence on teacher perceptions, student outcomes and school climate and culture (Rodriguez & Hovde, 2002). On the other hand, “principals work in a strict and complex environment, subject to a bureaucratic centralised system, leaving them little decision-making autonomy” (Kurdi, 2011, p. 1). This indicates that there is still little confidence in granting school principals greater authority in the KSA. Thus, this study offers some important insights into the readiness of principals to lead schools autonomously.

There is a considerable amount of research into school autonomy from various contexts worldwide, especially those of Europe and the USA. However, there appears to be a dearth of studies addressing issues of school autonomy in the Arabic world (Saleh & Alshaer, 2010). This study aims to contribute to the Arabic context by exploring the possibility of implementing school autonomy in the KSA.

There are several important areas where this study makes an original contribution in terms of methodology. It uses an explanatory sequential mixed method, which is unusual in school reform research in KSA. In addition, it has targeted four cities in the survey and two cities in the interviews, while other research efforts have typically focussed on only one city



throughout. Moreover, this study includes female principals in the survey, which is unusual in research conducted by a male researcher because of cultural and social considerations.

This study aims to explore the three concepts of decision making, autonomy and accountability in the context of globalisation. This will provide a new theoretical framework (please see Figure 4.1 in Chapter four) to describe the issue under investigation.

It is also hoped that this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of decision making in the Arabic context as there is a belief that autonomy in decision making is a positive factor in developed countries but is negative in developing countries (Hanushek, Link, & Woessmann, 2013).

The findings should make an important contribution and aim to:

- Highlight the school management challenges that currently face schools in Saudi Arabia.
- Highlight the challenges expected to face school management when granting schools greater autonomy.
- Offer insight into the readiness of principals to lead autonomous schools and the reality of schools' preparation for such change.
- Understand the professional needs for school development and how granting school leaders greater autonomy will contribute to improved school performance and student outcomes.

## **Personal interest and motives**

I was born and raised in Saudi Arabia. I studied at primary, secondary, and high school, and obtained my bachelor's and master's degrees at educational facilities there. During all these stages, I had different experiences of education development in different economic, political and social circumstances. My interest in educational management started early in my career and has developed over the course of my education and subsequent employment.

First, I spent more than five years as a principal and deputy principal between 2001 and 2006, where I realised the scale of the difficulties involved in managing schools under the current conditions in Saudi Arabia. Second, I have worked closely with principals for many years as a trainer, and through various discussions, I have found school principals to hold the same opinions regarding their currently limited authority and how this affects their performance.

Third, my master's degree considered transformational management, which I found that the majority of principals have applied at least in part (Almalki, 2010). This means that whilst they have the ability to properly manage their schools autonomously, they do not have the authority to do so. I am also interested in leadership generally, and I fully understand the role of a leader in terms of the success or failure of their organisation, yet there have been no real attempts by the Ministry of Education to grant principals greater authority; hence, I seek to consider this issue in order to further its general understanding.

## **1.7 Overview of the thesis**

Chapter one: This is the first chapter of the study which gives a summary presenting the research aim and objectives on which the entire study is based.

Chapter two: Chapter two provides a global context of the study focussing on globalisation, neo-liberalism, the knowledge economy, education reform and decentralisation.

Chapter three: Chapter three provides a local context of Saudi Arabia and includes two sections. The first is an overview of Saudi Arabia through its geography and strategic location, demography, history, social context, and politics and economy. The second section describes the current education system and educational reforms in Saudi Arabia.

Chapter four: Chapter four is related to the study concepts (decision-making, autonomy and accountability) and literature review. It is divided into three sections, each of which is devoted to one concept and begins with definitions, followed by relevant theories, and a review of the previous studies relating to the concept in an educational context.

Chapter five: Chapter five is the Methodology, which presents the study's research paradigm and identifies the study context. It has highlighted participant and data collection methods, the approaches chosen, and provides the context, and highlights the methods, of the data analysis. In addition, it discusses ethical issues then concludes by describing the demographic characteristics of the survey participants and interviewees' backgrounds.

Chapters six, seven, eight and nine report the analysis of the findings and discussion that answers the five research questions.

Chapter ten presents a set of overall conclusions to the study which highlights its contributions to knowledge and reveals the insight and arguments determined by the study. It also discusses the implications of, and gives recommendations for, further research.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

Improving educational attainment is a key issue worldwide, with many nations undertaking major educational reform in order to ensure their students can effectively compete in an increasingly global marketplace. Saudi Arabia's education system has traditionally been centralised and tightly controlled by the Saudi Ministry of Education, while people essential to the educational process, such as school leaders, have historically had relatively little influence on the process. However, recent educational reforms suggest that Saudi Arabia may be moving towards a decentralised system of education, which would involve the transfer of decision-making powers to local governments and schools. The vast majority of the literature on school autonomy, however, has been investigated and considered in a Western context, and accordingly, there appears to be very little research that has been undertaken in the Arabic context. Thus, this thesis aims to fill the associated gaps in the literature, in this instance with regards to school autonomy in Saudi Arabia. The main purpose of this study is to explore school leaders' perceptions of their capacity to work more independently in the context of national school reform as Saudi Arabia shifts from a centralised to a more decentralised system. This chapter has introduced the research project by identifying the problem, describing the research aims and questions, the conceptual framework, the methodology, and the general significance of the study. The following chapter will discuss the global context.

## **Chapter 2: Global context**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses global contextual factors related to this study. It is organised according to three main themes. First, I will consider globalisation as a key concept, followed by neoliberalism (which includes marketisation) and the knowledge economy. The second part discusses education reform, both globally and locally within Saudi Arabia. The chapter will then conclude by arguing for decentralisation as a common approach to reforming education.

### **2.2 Globalisation**

Globalisation is a topic of considerable interest for researchers, and the literature has been devoted to the concept and its implications across several sectors in recent years. The process of globalisation is having considerable effects on education worldwide (Vulliamy, 2010), and governments are accordingly seeking to reform their education systems. This section will consider this issue in terms of definitions of globalisation, the nature of the forces of globalisation.

#### **2.2.1 Defining Globalisation**

Globalisation is one of the most important and most studied, and yet still most misunderstood, phenomena in comparative education research (Wiseman, Astiz, & Baker, 2016). There is currently a range of definitions that attempt to capture the concept of globalisation. Giddens (1990) defines globalisation as an “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local occurrences are shaped by events occurring many miles away and, indeed, vice versa” (p. 64). Similarly, Robertson, Brown, Pierre, & Sanchez-Puerta (2009) argue that the term globalisation “could encompass the

transmission of ideas; the intermingling of cultures; the preservation or loss of national identity; exchanges of technology, capital, workers, and products across borders; and the role of international nongovernmental organisations” (p. 64). Another view is that globalisation is indicative of a multidimensional combination of economic, politic, social and cultural factors (Scholte, 2000; Yeates, 2001; George & Wilding, 2002; Achanso, 2014). An additional – and particularly significant – view expressed by Clinton (2000) is that globalisation is inevitable:

*“globalisation is not something we can hold off or turn off. It is the economic equivalent of a force of nature like wind or water. There is no point in denying the existence of wind or water or trying to make them go away. The same is true for globalisation. Governments can work to maximise its benefits and minimise its risks, but they cannot ignore it, and it is not going away”. (Clinton, 2000, Remarks at Vietnam National University in Hanoi, para. 18)*

In line with this stance, this study defines globalisation as an uncontrollable phenomenon that eliminates geographical boundaries between nations and cultures to exchange ideas, knowledge and products. This phenomenon has affected all economic, political, social and cultural dimensions.

### **2.2.2 Forces of Globalisation**

There are three main views about the forces that drive globalisation. The first is that certain international institutions are controlling and guiding educational systems. For example, Daun (2007) claims that the most important international bodies of globalisation, such as the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank, play a significant role in the spread of models such as decentralisation. These models, borrowed from different countries that have already

reformed the administration and management of their own education systems, occur regardless of how and why different governments adopt elements of the world model.

Similarly, Anderson-Levitt (2003), pointed out that:

*“theorists see that ideas as being imposed by the economic power of a network of global institutions, such as the World Bank and other aid donors” (p. 4).*

In addition, Stromquist (2002) argues that the effects of globalisation on education are evident in developing nations, as led by global organisations:

*“through the uncontested adoption of initiatives in developed countries along such lines as decentralisation, privatisation, the assessment of student performance, and the development of tighter connections between education and the business sector. In this process of adoption, the influence of international lending and development institutions, as carriers of globalisation, is clearly discernible” (p. 16).*

The second view, that of who is actually driving globalisation, is that a core zone of nations, namely the United States, the European Union, and Japan, dominate periphery nations in this regard. It is argued that the goal of this core is to legitimise its power by inculcating its values into periphery nations through national school systems through the teaching of capitalist modes of thought and analysis (Tabulawa, 2003). The third opinion, as espoused by Spring (2009), is that the globalisation of education is a process originating in the spread of Western educational ideas and that is sustained by national leaders selecting best practices and research from a global flow of educational ideas.

However, there are drawbacks to each of these three arguments, the first being that the associated influences have become greater than great nations and international institutions can themselves exert. For instance, small countries may become more influential on the worldwide stage through the development of their educational systems as well as through their media power. The media are seen today as playing a fundamental role in enhancing and propagating globalisation, and facilitating cultural exchange and multiple flows of information (Matos, 2012). Thus, the exchange of ideas and cultures among different peoples has become an influential aspect in changing educational policies and placing pressure on governments to develop their systems accordingly. In summary, it is difficult to limit the forces and manifestations of globalisation because it is a changeable and continuous process.

### **2.2.3 Neoliberalism**

One of the key drivers of globalisation is the notion of neoliberalism. During the past thirty years, the term 'neoliberalism' has become widely used in academic and political discussion. It has been argued that we live in an era of neoliberalism, where neoliberalism is the dominant ideology shaping our world today (Thorsen, 2010). According to Davies and Bansel (2007):

*“the discourses and practices of neoliberalism, including government policies for education and training, public debates regarding standards and changed funding regimes, have been at work on and in schools in capitalist societies since at least the 1980s” (p. 247).*

The principles of neoliberalism are consistent with this study from two perspectives. The section below describes the ideology underlying neoliberalism and its relation to the current study in two parts. The first is the positive impact of neoliberalism on people's lives through personal freedom, the free market and providing for human well-being. On the other hand,



the second part discusses the negative aspects of neoliberalism which are, variously, reducing democracy, achieving profits for rich countries, privatisation, and increasing the problems of education.

### **The Positive Impact of Neoliberalism**

The advantages of neoliberalism can be considered from three perspectives, which are: first, personal freedom to make decisions and choices and that the free market introduces limits to state power. Kotz (2002) argues that neoliberal theory claims that a largely unregulated capitalist system, a “free market economy”, not only embodies the ideal of free individual choice but also achieves optimum economic performance with respect to efficiency, economic growth, technical progress, and distributional justice (p. 1). Whilst the free market is still a disputed matter in terms of its benefits and disadvantages, it is argued here to be a positive manifestation of neoliberalism as seen by the majority. However, this matter is still controversial, and it might be preferable to research each context separately.

In terms of personal freedom and the limitation of state power, Keeney (2016) argued that the main notion of liberal theories is that the state should not impose any conception of the “good life” on its citizens or justify political decisions through a preference for one vision of human excellence over another. The state must remain consistently neutral over the ends that a given individual may choose. Not only this, but any interference by the state or obvious preference to one approach over another is seen as a tyrannical and unjustified intrusion into the privacy of the individual. In light of the ultimate plurality of values, liberalism views the ideal function of the state to be that of a regulator, limited to ordering those social arrangements which both optimises the freedom of individuals to choose their own ends and which promote an active progression toward such ends. Also, Gill and Scharff (2011) point out

that the autonomous and self-regulatory manner of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to free choice, although they also view neoliberalism as a regulating force in itself; Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2007) perspective bears a strong resemblance to that of Keeney. They emphasise that “the role of government within neo-liberalism became that of creating optimum conditions for the practice of global economics in a social order totally committed to the logic of the marketplace” (p. 8).

As a result of personal freedom, neoliberalism places considerable emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility, both of which are closely related to the current study on autonomy. This adopts the view that, within a neoliberal society, a subject can become anything they choose through hard work, initiative and self-improvement - enterprising individuals make choices, decisions, and so forth (Gill & Scharff, 2011). On the other hand, individuals, in view of neoliberalism, are directly accountable for their choices and decisions which means that options need to be carefully considered and decisions taken with appropriate responsibility. Both the above aspects are clearly central to decision making, autonomy and accountability, which are the key concepts addressed in this study.

Second, “neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). However, achieving individual liberties can only be achieved by reconfiguring the relationship between the ruler and the governed, as Ong indicated when he argued that neoliberalism can be defined as ‘reconfiguring relationships between governing and governed, power and knowledge, sovereignty and territoriality’ (Ong, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, Houston (2013) has a broader and more comprehensive view, considering neoliberalism as a welfare ideology based on the standardisation and

commodification of services and organisational governance, although this involves increasing modes of surveillance, pacification, and discipline amongst professional staff and service users alike. These issues are explored in the following section.

### **A Critique of Neoliberalism**

In this section, some of the key problems associated with neoliberalism will be discussed from four perspectives: reducing democracy, achieving profits for rich countries, privatisation, and increasing the problems with education.

Despite the widely held ideology that the neoliberal project promises absolute democracy, that is, freedom from the despotism of the state, critiques argue the opposite is true. Neoliberalism tends to curtail democracy and political freedom (Springer, 2009; Bruff, 2014), as demonstrated by a proliferation of commentators over the last four decades (Hickel, 2016). It has been argued that neoliberalism paves the way for elites to seize political and economic power while marginalising voters' ability to choose economic laws. This process is known as political capture, represented by global bodies such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation, and the World Bank. Critics argue they contribute to the reduction of democratic representation. Neoliberalism tends to undermine the national sovereignty of governmental parliaments through hidden control by, for example, the US Treasury, trade agreements and foreign banks. In a similar argument about the limitation of democracy, Cores (2007) suggested that policies that resulted in cutting back on democracy were coincident with the installation of economic neoliberalism and the imposition of anti-state, free market policies that were contrary to all forms of protection over the national economic space. In contrast, there is an opposing perspective that espouses the positive role of neoliberalism with regards to the spread of democracy. Bruff (2016) claims that "Neoliberalism's genesis

during a period bearing witness to the growing role of social democracy, organised labour, welfare programmes, and so on, in capitalist political economies, means that its worldview has from the beginning covered all areas of social life” (p. 108). In addition, Lukas Oberndorfer (2015) thinks that “whereas before 2008 neoliberalisation proceeded primarily via an erosion of substantive democracy, since 2008 we have seen various breaks with formal democracy” (Springer, Birch, & MacLeavy, 2016, p. 113).

The second drawback of neoliberalism, which is that of earning profits for rich nations. In the early 1980s, the US promise was that neoliberal reform would improve economic growth and reduce poverty globally, but instead the US pursued the exact opposite. In developing nations, per capita income growth rates fell to half their previous levels, dropping from more than 3% to 1.7%. For instance, in Sub-Saharan Africa, the GNP of the average country decreased by about 10% during the 1980s and 1990s (Chang, 2007). In fact, neoliberalism demonstrably reaps profits for rich countries, especially the United States, by exploiting the majority in favour of the economic elites (Saad Filho & Johnston, 2005).

For instance, Lara and Lopez (2007) discuss the consequences of neoliberalism in a number of nations in their work ‘The Harvest of Neoliberalism in Latin America’ which is an increasingly unequal society - a society with increasing unemployment, underemployment and job insecurity, increasing poverty, an increasingly informalised and technologically unsophisticated society, declining standards of living and a downwardly social mobility, increasing levels of violence and criminality, whose citizens progressively see their political and social rights expropriated by the market, and ultimately a society that offers no future. However, in considering the dark side of neoliberalism, it is also clearly irrational to hold the belief that it is the only cause of all these problems. There are of course other factors that have led these countries to such a position.

Related to the issue of earning profits for rich nations, Hyslop-Margison and Sears (2007) stated that:

*“Neoliberalism, with its exploitation of a global labour market, its sustained assault on the economic status of all workers, and powerful mechanisms of ideological manipulation, has provided a bulwark against the complete collapse of capitalism predicted by Marx. However, neoliberalism has achieved this objective only at the expense of exacting a tremendous price from the quality of life experienced by working class citizens” (p. 1).*

The third negative aspect of neoliberalism is privatisation. In the US, nationally owned resources and services were routinely sold to the private sector to increase productive efficiency. Public education was one of the sectors that shifted toward privatisation. Neoliberalism required increased accountability, and for schools and teachers to be held directly responsible for students’ academic results (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2007). Also, Buono (2007) claimed that while social problems steadily multiplied, neoliberal regimes demanded the privatisation of public services, the substitution of inefficient state apparatuses with “no state” or “less state,” all of which is to say that neoliberal state conduct made it impossible to sustain the minimum necessary levels of social spending.

Davidson-Harden and Majhanovich (2006) conducted a survey of trends to analyse initiatives for, and the processes of, privatisation in Canadian education from K–12 to post-secondary levels. They highlight two main connected trends: first, the intrusion of market discourse into education at all levels; and second, a growing tension between contrasting conceptions of education as a tradable commodity and as a social right. With regards to this point, it is important to clarify that the purpose of this study is not to investigate any mooted shift toward

privatisation, but to explore the potential move toward decentralisation and keeping education institutions and schools under the umbrella of the government.

Finally, neoliberalism is viewed as causing problems for the education sector. According to Radice (2013), “the multiple crises of higher education in the UK have their origins in the economic, social and political transformations that constituted the rise of neoliberalism since the mid-1970s” (p. 407). Radice (2013) instigated how higher education (HE) in the UK has been transformed since the beginnings of neoliberalism in the 1970s. He found that this shift created a wider economic culture that was increasingly centred on individual performance rather than collective purposes. He concluded that (HE) needs to begin by rethinking the education system as a whole, basing it around the premise of the promotion of practical equality of power and wealth through society.

In a similar neutral opinion, but from another perspective which concerns the content of neoliberalism, Ong (2006), for instance, asserted that “neoliberalism means many different things depending on one’s vantage point” (p. 1). As well as being a political and economic concept, it is also one that has been characterised as encompassing subjectivity itself (Foucault, 2008). Connell (2009) also states that neoliberalism is not only an economic policy agenda and a rearrangement of relations between capital and the state, but also an agenda of cultural change and institutional change through every arena of social life.

Regarding the current study context, it has been shown in this section that globalisation and neoliberalism influence the economic sector and all aspects of public life, including the field of education. However, there are two main difficulties to ‘importing’ neoliberal ideology into Saudi Arabia; first, in a nation such as Saudi Arabia where the formal religion and the first source of judgment is Islam (more details in the Saudi context in chapter three), there is no

complete freedom, while one of the underlying assumptions of neoliberalism is subjectivity in decisions or individual freedom. The second complicating matter is the limitation of state power that could in some cases be negative and contrary to the state's commitment to Islam as a source of legislation. When the state is less referential, Islam has less impact on people's lives. As for neoliberalism in education, the concepts of neoliberalism can be employed to serve educational reforms though it needs to be critically reviewed beforehand because some liberal concepts, such as autonomy, freedom choice and accountability may serve education reform policies.

### **Marketisation and Privatisation**

Brown (2015) defined Marketisation as "the attempt to put the provision of education on a market basis, where the demand and supply of student education, academic research and other university activities are balanced through the price mechanism" (p. 5). Similarly, privatisation is the "shifting of a function, either in whole or in part, from the public sector to the private sector" (Butler, 1991, p. 17). Accordingly, privatisation in education can be defined "as any type of educational provision not funded or controlled by state authorities, including for-profit and not-for-profit entities" (Zajda, 2006, p. 7). Since the rise of the neoliberal agenda, there has been an increasing attempt to privatise public services, including education (Lynch, 2006). In this section, the spread and existence of privatisation in education, the definition of marketisation and privatisation, as well as the relationship between marketisation and globalisation, neoliberalism and decentralisation as influential factors in education reform will be discussed. It concludes by focussing on some of the advantages of marketisation in education.

The orientation towards privatisation is “strong: it is currently taking place in many countries and within many sectors of the economy” (Belfield & Levin, 2002, p. 19). Many governments and nations have seen the privatisation of education as a way out of the decline of education levels as well as the inability to spend on education during periods of economic difficulties.

The Marketing of Education has become widespread to make schools more competitive. In fact, “the global trend of decentralisation, policies and strategies of marketisation and privatisation have become increasingly popular in educational governance, especially under the impact of globalisation” (Mok, 2003, p. 351). Bray (1999) argues that decentralisation and marketisation have been adopted as popular strategies in the education policies of numerous governments worldwide. The global trend of decentralisation and marketisation in education has impacted on the thinking and practice of policy makers and educators (Liu, 2010). For example, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea and Taiwan adopted decentralisation, corporatisation and marketisation in order to make their education systems more competitive in the global market (Mok, 2003).

The processes of marketisation and privatisation are related, but not identical; markets may operate within the framework of state-owned economic institutions, while private ownership may exist outside markets; marketisation and privatisation are two separate processes. However, in the specific circumstances of post-socialist regimes, the first was impossible without the second for historical and political, as much as for economic, reasons (Martin, 1999). The term ‘privatisation’ is an umbrella term referring to many different educational programmes and policies. As an overall definition, “privatisation is the transfer of activities, assets and responsibilities from government/public institutions and organisations to private individuals and agencies” (p. 19). Also, the marketisation of education can be defined as a



process whereby education becomes a commodity provided by competitive suppliers (Galpin, 2006).

Moving now to the discussion of marketisation under globalisation, liberalisation and decentralisation, Rizvi and Lingard (2010) also argued that globalisation plays a decisive role in shaping a country's education and well-being systems. Thus, it is important to understand how globalisation and marketisation are linked to main economic factors and to national histories, power relations and cultures.

On the question of liberalisation, Levin (2001) stated that "privatisation is often thought of as 'liberalisation' where agents are freed from government regulations, or as 'marketisation' where new markets are created as alternatives to government services or state allocation systems" (p. 19). The most important aspect of Levin's view is that freedom and independence are common features of liberalism and marketisation. This is confirmed by Mok and Tan (2004), in that one of the "manifestations of the marketisation of education is increased school autonomy" (Mok & Tan, 2004, p. 10). The freedom of schools through decentralisation is what this study will attempt to explore in terms of its efficiency on educational development in the light of phenomena such as globalisation, neoliberalism and privatisation. It is a widely held view that "a new era of privatisation is emerging, driven by globalisation, neo-liberal ideology, transnational companies and business interests" (Whitfield, 2000, p. 82). There is a possible connection between the neoliberal ideology and the belief that marketisation will raise efficiency and will automatically achieve universally needed outcomes. For example, the Singapore government adopts market principles and practices to manage its schools. They believe that this will make their education system meet the needs of a knowledge-based economy (Mok, 2003).

Another related and significant aspect of marketisation is decentralisation, which can be seen as one of the promoters for decentralisation; and not only that, but as a method that ensures multiple educational options for parents and students. Zhao and Qiu (2012) argued that private schools are assuming an increasingly important role in the Chinese education system, not just as a stimulus for decentralisation and marketisation but more importantly as a force of diversification and choice (Zhao & Qiu, 2012).

It is important to emphasise that the distinction between decentralisation of education and the privatisation of education is considerable. It is true that there is a relationship between them, but a relationship is subject to circumstances such as the prevailing economic and cultural situation. If the privatisation of education begins during a period of economic decline, this may lead many non-experienced investors to seek profit without giving appropriate attention to quality.

Ngok (2007) points out that:

*“The measures of decentralisation and the involvement of private forces in educational provision lead to the marketisation of education: the creation of an educational market where private individuals and organisations can compete with the public schools for clientele and can even run schools for profit. The adoption of this policy of marketisation against a background of a market-oriented economy leads to deep and far-reaching changes in the organisation of education” (p. 145).*

This view emphasises the relationship between decentralisation and marketisation of education and agrees with the hypothesis of this study, in that granting schools greater autonomy will lead to an increased number of options for running schools that will positively

affect the quality of education. However, it should again be considered that the gradation of change should take place in such a way as to ensure a smooth and acceptable change for, and to, the local community. For example, in Saudi Arabia, where this study was conducted, the economy is going through a period of instability and there are fears that the future will be significantly more difficult.

The privatisation movement is more complex than a mere increase in private funding. It can take many forms: an increase in the number of fully privately managed and funded schools; privately managed schools financed by public funds; public schools fully or partially financed by private funds; public schools run as private institutions, and which compete for public funds; private courses complementing the education provided in public schools or universities; privately contracting certain services; distance courses, etc. Moreover, “new information technology opens the way to many new forms of privately financed education to satisfy many different needs” (Belfield & Levin, 2002, p. 9). It is therefore important to take this into consideration when applying privatisation to education. In addition, because there are many forms of privatisation, it may be useful when beginning to implement privatisation that one should experience more than one form at the same time to more explore fully explore which is the most appropriate system.

Having discussed the link between marketisation and globalisation, liberalisation and decentralisation, the final part of this section addresses features of marketisation in education. First, the privatisation of education can be seen as increasing the opportunity for parents and students to choose their own education. However, Han (2014) conducted a study to explore the practices and perceptions of urban middle-class parents with children who have experienced the academic transition from primary to middle school in China. His study found that both students and parents face considerable pressure to gain advantages in the school-

choice competition. It concludes that they have to consider cultural, social and economic capital to varying degrees.

Second, privatisation of education can raise the educational quality. Recently, Yıldırım (2014) conducted a study to observe privatisation in education and its effects on the quality and equity of education in Turkey. The study found that physical conditions and educational quality were better in private schools; however, private schools cannot be considered to have greater success because they do not compete under equal circumstances. Both for-profit and non-profit institutions are still debating as to whether they could offer solutions to the problems of education. Targeting public schools in Turkey would be more hopeful in the sense of achieving equity and quality in education. However, one of the limitations with Yıldırım's study findings was that they do not explain why public schools still have better options by which to achieve quality and equity in education. The explanation might be that Turkey, as with many countries, is applying privatisation cautiously as there is still some concern as to its feasibility.

Another feature of the growing marketisation of education is the pressure due to competition between schools (Mok & Tan, 2004). Competition between schools improves outputs and contributes to improving the quality of teaching and extracurricular activities. In addition, competition will contribute to the increased training of teachers as well as improving classrooms and making schools more comfortable and attractive to students.

#### **2.2.4 The Knowledge Economy**

In the era of globalisation, knowledge is a vital factor in the determination of a state's influence and status in the world. Knowledge is power, and is the most significant investment for economic development. Thus, governments are striving to lead their nations towards

engagement in the knowledge economy. Del Giudice, Della Peruta and Carayannis (2011) argue that “One of the most important discoveries of our time is that knowledge opens the way, not only to economic development, but also to business and corporate success” (p. 11). This section discusses the knowledge economy through the following themes: first, the definition of a knowledge economy; second, the importance of a knowledge-based economy; third, the pillars of a knowledge economy; fourth, strategies towards implementing a knowledge economy; and, finally, the knowledge economy and education.

### **Defining the Knowledge Economy**

Powell and Snellman (2004) defined the knowledge economy as production and services based on knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technological and scientific advancement. The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the OECD “define the knowledge economy as a term associated with new skills, high performance and new added value as the only way for enterprises and countries to compete in the global economy” (Kurtic & Donlagic, 2012, p. 414).

### **The Importance of the Knowledge-based Economy**

Historically, material forces were dominant in national growth, prestige, and power; now products of the mind take precedence. Nations can transfer most of their material production thousands of miles away, focussing their attention on research and development and product design at home. The result is a new and productive partnership between ‘head’ nations, which design products, and ‘body’ nations, which manufacture them (Rosecrance, 1999, p. xi). This marks a change from an economy that relied on the exploitation of its natural resources, such as oil and gas, to an economy based on knowledge generation in a range of industries. Thus, the use of ideas and the application of technology is key to a knowledge-based economy,

rather than ‘old-fashioned’ physical abilities and the transformation of raw supplies or the exploitation of cheap labour. The need for innovation is greater in a knowledge economy and the cycles of new products become shorter. Other key features include the increase in global trading and rising competitive demands on producers.

Thomas Friedman (2005), referring to the US context, shares a view held by many commentators about what can actually be achieved by investing in the knowledge and skills of the workforce:

*“America, as a whole, will do fine in a flat world with free trade – provided it continues to churn out knowledge workers who are able to produce idea-based goods that can be sold globally and who are able to fill the knowledge jobs that will be created as we not only expand the global economy but connect all the knowledge pools in the world. There may be a limit to the number of good factory jobs in the world, but there is no limit to the number of idea-generating jobs in the world” (p. 230).*

Skills and knowledge are a necessity for gaining a reasonable chance in the labour market at all levels. The global knowledge economy is changing the demands of the labour market worldwide. Consequently, this is placing new expectations on people who need new knowledge and skills to be able to perform in their day-to-day working lives (World Bank, 2003a). Therefore, preparing people to deal with these demands requires a new style of education and training and, additionally, a model of lifelong learning. Leitch (2006) indicated the importance of skills and knowledge in a review of skills in the United Kingdom. Reflecting on increasing global economic competition, he noted that “skills were once a key lever for prosperity and fairness. Skills are now increasingly the key lever” (Leitch, 2006, p. 3). Hence,

the global knowledge economy is changing the demands of the labour market throughout the world; it also requires increased skills and knowledge of citizens to help them in their lives.

### **The Pillars of the Knowledge Economy**

The OECD Deputy Secretary-General, Berglind Asgeirsdottir argued in the OECD/NSF Conference on 'Advancing knowledge and the knowledge economy' that the development of the knowledge economy is dependent on four main pillars: innovation; new technologies; human capital; and enterprise dynamics. To develop and grow the knowledge economy, it is not sufficient to focus on a single policy or institutional arrangement; rather, a whole range of policies and coordinated actions are required to create the appropriate conditions. The policy mix must be based on a comprehensive strategy suited to each country or circumstance, as embedded within the four pillars outlined above. Furthermore, globalisation represents a driver that can influence all four pillars as well as four key factors that are becoming increasingly mobile and global in globalisation processes: 1) research and development; 2) the Internet; 3) highly skilled workers; and 4) multi-national companies (Robertson, 2008).

### **Strategies Toward the Knowledge Economy**

The process of building the knowledge economy includes: drawing on the lessons of success and learning from others; adopting conducive attitudes; adapting policy actions to development levels; managing reform processes; exploiting entry points and driving sectors and cities; and dealing with a country's context throughout development routes, policy agendas and sociocultural issues (World Bank, 2007). It is believed that the building of the knowledge economy in any nation will lead to the three consequences of global power and prestige, perceived benefits to the economy and, finally, jobs, especially highly skilled and well-paid jobs.

It is important to clarify that the knowledge economy must serve people's interests. As noted, the knowledge economy needs a highly educated workforce; therefore, education has a clear role to play in helping to produce highly educated knowledge workers who will be able to compete in the global marketplace. Factors of survival and competition in the knowledge economy era require academic skills such as literacy, foreign languages and scientific understanding such as the ability to use technology effectively and independently and work with different cultures (World Bank, 2003a). Therefore, critical to the success of any knowledge economy is its education system. This is of relevance to the present study, which is set against a backdrop of educational reforms in Saudi Arabia that seek to move towards decentralisation. It is believed that improving education would lead to the creation of a generation that is capable of innovation and production of ideas; that is, a generation that has been provided with skills to compete in the knowledge economy.

### **The Knowledge Economy and Education**

The report on Lifelong Learning for the Global Knowledge Economy by the World Bank (2003) emphasises that education is now a key factor in technological creation, adoption, and communication. This report suggests that low-income countries should redirect their attention towards basic education such as including investments in basic education and the upper secondary and tertiary levels (World Bank, 2003a).

The appearance of the global knowledge economy has played an important role in education. Throughout previous decades, many scholars have argued that the economy in developed nations has become driven by technologies based on knowledge and information production and sharing (Powell & Snellman, 2004).



Education systems in the era of globalisation face many challenges, as existing systems are not equipped to respond to changing economic policies, specifically those concerned with knowledge development. The World Bank report (2003) argued that “developing countries and countries with transition economies risk being further marginalised in a competitive global knowledge economy because their education and training systems are not equipping learners with the skills they need”, (World Bank, 2003a, xvii). This view suggests that in the age of the knowledge economy, in order to be competitive Saudi Arabia needs to improve the knowledge and skills of its future working population. Education is certainly primarily responsible for providing people with the necessary knowledge and skills. Therefore, in the following section, the impact of globalisation and the knowledge economy on education is further discussed.

## **2.3 Education Reform**

Not only can education improve the quality of people’s lives, but it can also raise productivity, creativity and capacity, thereby leading to broader economic and social benefits (Ozturk, 2001). This makes education reform a priority for many governments and nations. The fact that we are living in an age of globalisation is undisputable, and demands a continued conversation across educational cultures. Today, education is certainly the primary concern of many nations because it plays a significant role in shaping children’s characters and preparing them for a future in the globalised world. To meet educational goals, governments spend enormous amounts of money to develop educational plans and improve education services. This topic can be best addressed from three perspectives: globalisation and reforming education; international organisations and education reform; and educational reform approaches and the reformation of education in Saudi Arabia.

### **2.3.1 International Organisations and Education Reform**

Various international organisations have a prominent and influential role in education, either directly or indirectly. It is appropriate to discuss the purpose of some of these institutes and their influence on education in order to consider them in the planning stage of educational reforms. Also, this indicates the direct association between education and economy, as illustrated through the role of these global organisations.

Firstly, the World Trade Organisation is the only global international organisation dealing with the rules of trade between nations. At its heart are the WTO agreements, negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world's trading nations and ratified in their parliaments. The goal is to help producers of goods and services, exporters, and importers conduct their business (WTO, 2017). An important goal for the newly created WTO in 1995 was to make the organisation universal in its coverage. In order to join the World Trade Organisation, governments must unify trade and political economies, follow the rules and principles of international trade, and facilitate access to domestic markets for services and goods. In the past two decades, 34 states have joined the WTO including China, Russia and Saudi Arabia (WTO, 2016). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) since 11 December 2005 (Hertog, 2008). The WTO, through its General Agreement of Trade and Services (GATS) provision seeks to eliminate trade barriers in education, in which education is becoming globalised and is increasingly becoming a competitive commodity (Abbott, 2009).

Secondly, the World Bank (WB) which is "like a cooperative, made up of 189 member countries. These member countries, or shareholders, are represented by a Board of Governors, who are the ultimate policymakers at the World Bank" (World Bank, 2017a, Who

we are, para. 1). The World Bank has set two goals for state parties to achieve by 2030: end extreme poverty by decreasing the percentage of people living on less than \$1.90 a day to no more than 3%, and to promote shared prosperity by fostering the income growth of the bottom 40% for every country (World Bank, 2017b). The World Bank's policy on education changed from neoclassical economics to a neoliberal agenda in the 1980s. It spends about three billion US dollars per year in loan commitments, supporting hundreds of thousands of locations in over 100 countries in six areas, and has become the single largest source of development in the field of international education (Eginli, 2010).

Thirdly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which is "a specialised agency within the UN system, promotes collaboration among its member countries in the fields of education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, culture, and communications and information" (Blanchfield & Browne, 2013, p. 1). UNESCO aims to strengthen relations between communities and coordinate international cooperation in education, science and culture. It is also seeking to provide an environment rich in diversity and dialogue and making heritage a link between communities, the enjoyment of freedom of expression through democracy, and the advantages of scientific development for every citizen (UNESCO, 2017).

Finally, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an ongoing programme that offers insights for education policy and practice and that helps monitor trends in students' acquisition of knowledge and skills both across countries and in different demographic subgroups within each country. This programme is part of the contributions made by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) towards education. The result of its report (2014) suggested to "allow policy makers around the world to gauge the knowledge and skills of students in their own countries in comparison with those in other

countries, set policy targets against measurable goals achieved by other education systems, and learn from policies and practices applied elsewhere. While PISA cannot identify cause-and-effect relationships between policies/practices and student outcomes, it can show education, policy makers and the interested public how education systems are similar and different- and what that means for students” (OECD, 2014, p. 24). This result emphasises the impact of globalisation through sharing opinions regarding providing education, policies and learning measures.

### **2.3.2 Rethinking Educational Reform**

Education is a systemic enterprise; therefore, it can only be improved by targeting strategic points at different levels of the education system. This means “aligning the many components of the schooling system so as to impact maximally on learner performance” (Brown, 2004: p. 43). Against a background of global competition, learners should prepare, not only in terms of succeeding in the marketplace but also in becoming globally proficient, in order to foster the broader interests of all humanity.

Since developing countries are seriously affected by globalisation, the education system of developing countries should play a key role in their development (Al-Abri, 2011). Thus, policy-makers in developing countries frequently turn to the policies of nations who are considered to have the best practices in education. However, commentators such as Raffe and Semple (2011) are critical of such an approach. In addition, one can draw on an influential report by McKinsey (2015), “How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better”, who note in a study of 20 ‘improving systems’ that policy-learning approaches, rather than the policy-borrowing approaches, were most effective (Al-Kibsi et al., 2015).

Although the reform of education can be viewed differently in the contexts of the many local traditions around the world, one unifying element of what is considered to be the reformation of education is regarded to be the means in which cultural knowledge is passed on and in giving members of society the skills to be able to communicate and exchange ideas. In addition, professional learning communities, teachers' skills, programme coherence, principal leadership and resources are considered to be essential for successful large-scale reform (Fullan, Rolheiser, Blair, & Edge, 2004). For instance, Barber (2005) considered educational reform in the United Kingdom, reporting that the UK government not only implemented a curriculum and an evaluation programme but also provided for teachers' professional development, new leadership roles and responsibilities and quality instructional material.

There is no doubt that there are many factors that impact the success or failure of education reforms. However, the success of any educational reform policy depends on the amount of spending on the structure and type of assessment, the quality of the school infrastructure, teacher training, and the resources available to teachers (James & Connolly, 2000). The speed and the quality of the sustainability and implementation of education reform relies ultimately on the finances provided by the government.

### **2.3.3 Reforming Education in Saudi Arabia**

In recent decades, the Saudi economy has relied on oil as its major source of national income (this will be discussed in detail in the following section). However, in recent years oil prices have fluctuated significantly, causing Saudi Arabia to seriously consider diversifying its sources of income. Therefore, it aims to stimulate other industrial sectors such as manufacturing, communications, and information technology, which in turn creates an increased number of job opportunities. Also, the government aims to localise over 50% of spending on military

equipment by 2030. Vision 2030 will contribute to the activation of the knowledge economy and employment of technology, and will build national expertise in the fields of manufacturing, maintenance, repair, research and development (Vision 2030, 2017). However, the key problem with Vision 2030 is that it is still theoretical, and to date very little has actually been implemented. Also, the previous experiences in reforming education in Saudi Arabia, as mentioned earlier, suffer from serious gaps between planning and implementation.

Nasief (2004) identified the most noticeable challenges facing the Middle East nations regarding education reform: the technology revolution and the increasing amount of information available; the growth of the population; loss of national identity, and protecting the environment from the damage caused by scientific and technological developments. However, there are other challenges that Nasief's study did not mention, such as global and neoliberal trends in education, international competitiveness and economic difficulties.

The intent to reform education has historically been a part of formal public schooling. The most recently announced strategy for education development in Saudi Arabia was in 2013. The policy pointed out both the global and local challenges that face education in Saudi Arabia. The global challenges are globalisation, competitiveness and the knowledge revolution, while the local challenges are as follows:

- Geographical extension of the Saudi Kingdom and population dispersal.
- High growth rate of the population.
- Achieve a balance between maintaining the identity of the community and openness to the world and development in the twenty-first century.

- Promoting the Kingdom's status as a centre of knowledge in the Arab and Islamic worlds.
- Raising the awareness of the community in order to deal with the new era in a positive manner.
- Promoting the spirit of citizenship among the community.
- Training Saudis with the necessary skills for the labour market to increase their employment opportunities in the private sector.
- Achieving the knowledge economy and diversification.

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia has begun a new phase in transforming its oil-based economy into a knowledge economy through Vision 2030 (which was instigated by the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in April 2016). Nurunnabi (2017) confirmed that there are six key aspects that need to be considered in the development of Saudi Arabia's knowledge economy: human capital; innovation; information and communications technology (ICT); the economy; education; and employment. Thus, reforming education becomes a necessary step to overcome economic difficulties, which is what the government is seeking to achieve through Vision 2030.

## **2.4 Decentralisation**

Decentralisation of education is one of the reforms that emerged in the 1980s whose aim was purely to minimise the costs, but today has become an almost global phenomenon (Sen & Bandyopadhyay, 2010). This section discusses decentralisation as one of globalisation's solutions to reforming education under seven themes: the definition of decentralisation, causes and consequences of decentralisation, the benefits of decentralisation; the problems associated with decentralisation; decentralisation in education; disparity of decentralisation success and factors affecting its results; and applying decentralisation in Saudi Arabia and its associated challenges.

### **2.4.1 Definitions**

Decentralisation is complex and has different meanings that refer to different types and reforms of decentralised management and government systems with different policy goals and strategies (Reddy, 1996). Bray (1985) defined decentralisation as the transfer of decision-making powers from higher levels in the official hierarchy to lower levels. Similarly, McGinn and Welsh (1999) defined decentralisation as a shift in the location of those who control, a transfer of power from those at one level of an institution to those in another level. In terms of decentralisation in education, Zajda (2006) argued that decentralisation in education can be defined as the process of delegating the power and responsibility over the distribution and the use of resources, for instance, finances, human resources, and curricula produced by central government to local schools. Here, an example of one of the most common types of decentralisation which is School Based Management (Daun, 2007). The term (SBM) School Based Management refers to the shift of authority from the central governmental to the school level (Caldwell, 2005), whereas Malen, Ogawa, and Kranz (1990) argued that "School-



based management can be viewed conceptually as a formal alteration of governance structures, as a form of decentralisation that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement and relies on the redistribution of decision-making authority as the primary means through which improvement might be stimulated and sustained” (p. 290).

#### **2.4.2 Decentralisation Causes and Consequences**

Globalisation has driven some governments to reduce their control over education and move to local communities via the use of decentralisation (shields, 2013). However, globalisation itself does not require or cause decentralisation, but the discourse on the world models creates a mixture of elements as a result of market orientation in which decentralisation is an obvious consequence (Daun, 2007). Decentralisation was implemented in a few countries before the 1980s, principally for political reasons. Scholars have found a number of general reasons that might lead to the appearance of decentralisation (Daun, 2007). The first is global and international pressure; the second is general economic decline and the inability of governments to finance the education system or increase educational budgets; the third is the weakening legitimacy of the state and public sector; the fourth is cultural factors; and, finally, one must also consider the declining performance of the education system in question.

It is important to raise the question as to why decentralisation is being discussed as a solution to many of the administrative problems in education. Patrinos and Fasih (2009) indicated two ideas in SBM theory related to decentralised decision making in schools that may change educational outcomes. First, one of the main ideas behind SBM is that people at the local level (parents, community members, school staff, and students) have more information about the school than the central government has. This means that local people will make better, more appropriate decisions for the school than will the centrally based Ministry of Education or

even the local education authority. The second notion is that SBM may theoretically change educational results through promoting greater community and parental involvement in the school, and therefore prompting closer observation of, and more accountability by, the people who are making decisions about school management.

Effective education involves not only physical input such as schoolrooms, teachers, and curricula, but also the less tangible incentives that lead to better instruction and learning. Education systems place great demands on the managerial, technical, and financial capacities of governments; therefore, education as a service is too complex to be produced and distributed efficiently in a centralised approach (Patrinos & Fasih, 2009). Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) indicated that most of the incentives that affect learning outcomes are institutional in nature. They identify three incentives in particular: school autonomy, school accountability, and choice and competition.

### **2.4.3 The Benefits of Decentralisation**

This thesis argues that decentralisation is a natural and widespread method of managing organisations that demand a higher quality of education that reflects local values and priorities. In the era of globalisation, decentralisation in education offers benefits in a number of ways. First, decentralisation has resulted in improvement in the outcomes of education and student results in various developed and developing countries. For example, Galiani, Schargrodsky, Hanushek and Tommasi (2002) evaluated the impact of school decentralisation on educational quality in Argentina. They examined the causal effects of secondary school decentralisation on educational quality, as measured by mathematics and Spanish standardised tests administered by the National System of Educational Quality Evaluation (SINEC). They found that decentralisation in secondary schools improves student

performance, concluding that “although school decentralisation generally shows a positive impact on educational equality, policymakers should be cautious in considering such a program if they have doubts about the competence of local governments” (p. 299).

Second, decentralisation is expected to lead to an improved quality of education. Winkler and Yeo (2007) argued that policies designed to increase school autonomy may contribute to an improved service delivery, which is common in many parts of the world. Third, decentralisation increases the efficiency and the freedom of the school from the bureaucracy typically inherent to a centralised system (Bjork, 2007). This argument is supported via the result of Coelho’s study (2009) that aimed to investigate the effects of the organisational structure of primary and secondary education systems on their productive efficiency. The Coelho study concluded that the share of public providers was found to exert a negative effect on efficiency, whereas the degree of decentralisation of public providers was found to exert a positive effect. Fourth, decentralisation empowers parents, teachers and local communities by involving them in school management (Coelho, 2009). Finally, decentralisation opens opportunities for financing schools through charitable and local business organisations (Coelho, 2009).

#### **2.4.4 A Critique of Decentralisation**

The recent global wave of decentralisation has exposed a number of problems in certain parts of the world. However, here, we argue five in particular. First, Devas (2005) reported that there is a certain amount of realistic evidence that financial decentralisation is linked to lower levels of corruption. The main weakness with this view is that corruption likely exists in both centralised and decentralised systems, if one is being realistic. Therefore, it may not seem

objective to link corruption to decentralisation because there are other factors that can affect the existence of corruption.

Second, decentralisation can lead to confusion over education management, causing conflicting decisions or failure to carry out functions with the consequent adverse effects on quality and efficiency. Several factors affect the impact of decentralisation, such as the capacity of the empowered decentralised unit to carry out their new tasks, the technical and information support necessary that is provided via central education ministries for good governance and accountability, and to what extent the elected school committees reflect their communities or are dominated by political elites (Collins & Gillies, 2007).

Third, Galiani et al. study (2002) found that the advantages of decentralisation may be weakened when local governments lack technical capabilities.

Finally, the influence of decentralisation can be negative, as schools located in poor and badly administered provinces with fiscal shortages might actually perform worse than under centralisation (Galiani et al., 2002). Thus, decentralisation can lead to a growth in local inequality and fiscal instability in such areas.

### 2.4.5 The Challenges of Implementing a Decentralised System

The implementation of decentralisation may face certain challenges. In this section, some of these will be discussed to gain a greater understanding of the stage of the actual application. One of the vital issues in decentralisation is the necessity to understand who controls, and indeed who must control, education in terms of administration, financing and curriculum planning (Zajda, 2006). Therefore, the distribution of duties and determination of responsibility for accurate decision making is key to the success of the implementation. An overlap in decision-making will cause further chaos and decentralisation may itself become a problem.

The second challenge in the decentralisation of education is which of the many functions in the system to decentralise (Zajda & Gamage, 2009). However, Zajda (2006) showed that complete political and administrative decentralisation is not possible, because all policy decisions concerning finance, personnel and employment retain varying degrees of centralisation and decentralisation. Therefore, the real policy issue is one of finding the necessary balance between centralisation and decentralisation (Zajda, 2006). This issue leads us to the necessity of graduation in the implementation of decentralisation and do not move from one step to the next until having ensured the success of the current one. For example, granting school management the authority to select teachers and evaluate their performance in this position. Afterwards, according to the outcomes of this step, it will be clear whether they can be granted greater authority, or otherwise. Another challenge of educational decentralisation was argued by Do Vale (2016):

*“finding the right balance among quality, equity, and cohesion of the national education systems is challenging because decentralising processes are plagued*

*with conflict regarding diverging preferences over policy choices. Moreover, when a policy choice is adopted, there are difficulties associated with implementation of norms and rules in the educational systems” (p. 601).*

The outcomes of decentralisation are conditional on a large number of factors, such as formulated policy, the type of decentralisation, whether market mechanisms have been included, implemented policy, and local cultural, economic and political contexts. Decentralisation might require both careful planning and extensive training and additional staff, resources and equipment, rather than less (Daun, 2007). Thus, not all nations that have attempted to implement decentralisation have succeeded; some have quite badly failed.

#### **2.4.6 Successful Decentralisation**

In developed countries, SBM is introduced explicitly to improve students’ academic performance. However, in developing countries, how school decentralisation will eventually affect student performance is less clear (Patrinos & Fasih, 2009).

Despite the implementation of decentralisation, some countries such as Brazil, Spain, and South Africa have failed to build high-performing educational systems; indeed, they have only made small improvements in the learning achievements of their students over the past few decades. However, there are models of nations successfully transforming to decentralisation, such as South Korea. This variation in success indicates the importance of knowing the causes and the factors of success in some countries, and failures in others. Do Vale (2016) argued that the South Korean government created a minimally centralised institutional apparatus before applying educational decentralisation in order to allow the implementation of centrally designed decisions.

#### **2.4.7 Decentralisation in Saudi Arabia**

As mentioned under the theme of reforming education in Saudi Arabia earlier in this chapter, the Saudi government has emplaced various initiatives to reform education through the transformation from centralisation to decentralisation. However, these plans have been set with caution; this caution seems justified, because if the trend towards decentralisation in education is commendable, it clearly needs to be regulated. Of course, each country has its own unique conditions under which appropriate controls will be put in place. For example, what gives good results in Germany may not be suitable for application in other countries. Nations have different possibilities, social systems, cultural orientations, and strategic objectives for the inputs and outputs to the education process (Alharbi, 2015).

Nevertheless, education reforms in Saudi Arabia need to take more serious steps in terms of shifting from centralism to decentralism, as indeed do many countries around the world. It is argued that power should be redistributed and delegated within the school to allow it to become self-managing. Considering that decentralisation does not mean leaving everything to the whims and fancies of the school management or allowing them to do whatever they wish without considering the required standards, it is essential that legal and educational oversight should be assigned to monitor the performance and achievements of schools.

This section discussed vital issues related to reforming education, namely those of globalisation, neoliberalism and the knowledge economy. It concluded by arguing the necessity to reform education in the era of globalisation and decentralisation. The following section presents these arguments in the Saudi Arabian context.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of the current educational system on school principals' management roles and their readiness for greater autonomy under several influential global and local aspects. Thus, in this chapter the researcher, discussed the global context through globalisation, neoliberalism, and the knowledge economy. The chapter emphasised the impact of these global influences which are driving many local changes, including education reform. The chapter concluded with a discussion of decentralisation as a global phenomenon (Sen & Bandyopadhyay, 2010) that has had a positive effect on the efficiency of schools (Coelho, 2009), and additionally what the opportunity to shift to decentralisation in order to reform education in Saudi Arabia might actually encompass. A gap, however, was identified in the context of Saudi Arabia in terms of granting schools greater authority. Although there are a number of studies exploring educational reform, research in the area of autonomous schools is currently extremely limited.



## **Chapter 3: The national context – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This section will give an overview of the Saudi Arabian context to provide a better understanding of contextual factors underlying the study. This section is divided into two parts: the first includes an overview of Saudi Arabia through its geography and strategic location, demography, history, social context, and politics and economy; the second describes the education system in Saudi Arabia. Finally, this section will conclude by presenting the proposed educational reforms in Saudi Arabia through a discussion of Vision 2030 and its relation to educational reforms.

### **3.2 Overview of Saudi Arabia**

#### **3.2.1 Geography**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is located in the Arabian Peninsula, as seen in Figure (3.1), bordered to the east by the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, the Kingdom of Bahrain and the Arab Gulf, Amman to the southeast, Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait to the north, the Red Sea to the west and Yemen to the south. Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the region and the birthplace of Islam. It is located in the Middle East, and occupies a strategic location between the three biggest continents, Asia, Africa, and Europe (Saudi Geological Survey, 2012). Saudi Arabia has a total area of approximately 2.8 million square kilometres (Central Department of Statistics, 2006) and covers around 70% of the Arabian Peninsula. It is divided into thirteen districts (Saudi Geological Survey, 2012).

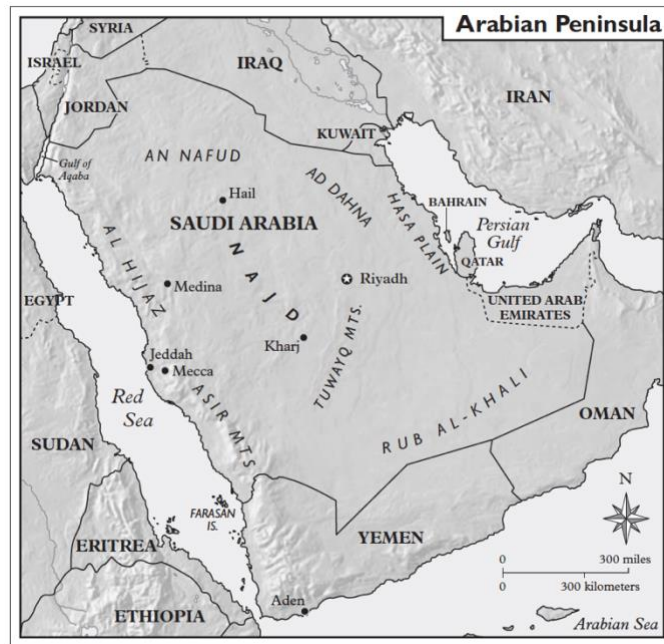


Figure 3.1: The Arabian Peninsula

*The Arabian Peninsula is the world's largest such landmass. Situated at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, it has long played a significant role in human history, though its inhospitable geography and climate kept Arabia isolated (Wynbrandt, 2010, p. 2).*

### 3.2.2 Demographics

According to general authority statistics (2017), which are themselves preliminary estimates (2016) of a demographic survey from 2016, the Saudi population is 20.4 million, and the non-Saudi population 12.2 million, a large percentage of which is youth under 25 years of age, at 46%. The Saudi female population is 10 million, while the Saudi male population is 10.4 million (please see more details in Table: 3.1). By tracking the population increase in Saudi Arabia, it can be seen that there has been a significant growth in population over the last 50 years. For example, the population of the Saudi Kingdom in 1974 was just over 7 million (Central

Department of Statistics, 2006); by 2016, the population had increased to 32.6 million (General Authority for Statistics, 2017).

The largest percentage of the population comprises of young people under the age of 25 years (46%). This population needs more schools and universities, as well as an improved quality of education. Such significant growth increases governmental responsibility to provide a proper, basic education for individuals as well as improve the level of educational services. The size of Saudi Arabia's youth alone places considerable pressure on the educational system, before one even considers how Saudi Arabia has changed over recent decades to meet the demands of modern life (Bowen, 2014).

*Table 3.1: Saudi population in 2017 by age*

Age	Population	Percentage
4 - 0	2,734,316	8%
9 - 5	2,835,657	9%
14 - 10	2,483,984	8%
19 - 15	2,265,472	7%
24 - 20	2,526,143	8%
29 - 25	3,111,770	10%
34 - 30	3,147,830	10%
39 - 35	3,503,179	11%
44 - 40	3,132,169	10%
49 - 45	2,327,996	7%
54 - 50	1,626,211	5%
59 - 55	1,124,497	3%
64 - 60	742,511	2%
69 - 65	414,534	1%
74 - 70	276,103	1%
79 - 75	164,237	1%
+ 80	196,032	1%
Total	32,612,641	100%

*Source: General Authority for Statistics, 2017*

### 3.2.3 History

The history of Saudi Arabia can be categorised into three historic stages:

**The first Saudi state (1745-1818).** In Al-Dir'iyah, the capital of the first Saudi state, Imam Muhammad ibn Saud and Al-Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab met in 1744 and formed an alliance with the agreement to reform the Islamic faith and rebuild it based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, in that era, large parts of the Arabian Peninsula were united, which prompted a new era of security and stability through the imposition of Islamic law known as "Sharia" in people's lives. In addition, increased knowledge and the emergence of scientific exploration developed, the economic sector improved, and various institutions and administrative systems were established. The attack of the Ottoman forces in 1811 resulted in considerable devastation, in particular the destruction of various districts in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula and the capital, Al-Dir'iyah, which was the capital city of the first Saudi state. However, despite these events, citizens remained loyal to the Saudi state.

**The second Saudi state (1822-1891).** Two years after the end of the first Saudi state, Imam Turki bin Abdullah bin Mohammed bin Saud returned to found the second Saudi state and its capital, Riyadh, in 1824.

**The modern (third) Saudi state (1902 - present).** The third Saudi state was founded by King Abdulaziz Al Saud in the name of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. This period saw the emergence of Al-Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul-Wahab in Al-Auyainah, who is credited with being the founder of various religious reforms (Al-Zaidi, 2004).

On the 15<sup>th</sup> January 1902, King Abdulaziz bin Abdulrahman bin Faisal Al Saud was able to regain Riyadh and return his family there in order to start a new page in the history of Saudi Arabia. This was a truly historic event and a major turning point in the history of the region because it led to the establishment of a modern Saudi Arabia state, the unification of the majority of the Arabian Peninsula, and the accomplishment great cultural achievements in various fields (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The modern Saudi state was founded on a set of principles. One of these pillars is:

*“Saudi Arabia is an Islamic Arab state with full sovereignty, its religion is Islam, and its constitution is the book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Messenger, peace be upon him. Its language is Arabic, and Its capital is Riyadh” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013).*

Throughout history, Saudi Arabia has played a significant role in human events, first as the land from which the Islamic empire spread, and more recently as the world’s largest source of oil. In recent decades, it has played the additional roles of a strategic military ally of the West and as a cornerstone of resolving Middle Eastern conflict (Wynbrandt, 2010).

Saudi Arabia has both a particular strategic location and religious status which makes the Saudi government’s decisions all the more important. In addition to being a nation of global significance, it is a nation of particular importance in the Gulf region, mainly because of its extensive oil production and reserves. However, Saudi Arabia faces a difficult struggle in the attempt to adapt to the new world and globalisation whilst at the same time preserving its unique Islamic identity (Bowen, 2014). It has been said that “the Saudi state confronts the multiple challenges of globalisation with a cautiousness that has characterised its modern history” (Bowen, 2014, p. 1).

### **3.2.4 Social Context**

Culture and religion are closely linked in Saudi society. All aspects of social and cultural life revolve around the application of the teachings of the Islamic religion and the promotion of the Islamic identity. The family is an integral element in the formation of Saudi society, which is considered one of the most vital factors in the survival of relatives' relations and values. The tribe is also arguably an important component, which is in many cases considered to be a force for maintaining Islamic culture. Although there has been a change in recent years regarding the status of woman, segregation between men and women in Saudi Arabia, which emerged from both religious and cultural principles, is still prevalent in schools and universities. As a consequence, only men teach in boys' schools and women in girls' schools.

The government of Saudi Arabia is responsible for the education of its populace. This is provided free of any charge at all stages for both citizens and residents. The government constructs colleges and schools and delivers school books; it pays salaries and set training programmes for principals and teachers. The Ministry of Education sets a number of criteria by which to assign both principals and teachers to particular schools. Rabee (2006) noted the criteria that the candidate should meet: experience as a deputy for no less than four years; an excellent report for the last three years; and a university qualification and postgraduate qualification such as an MEd or PhD, are preferred. The Ministry of Education, through each educational district, arranges a training course for each new principal before they start their new position. This course helps to enrich their experience and identify a number of supervisory mechanisms (Abdin, 2005).

There are some specific cultural features of the education system in Saudi Arabia that were relevant to this study. Importantly, due to gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, men and

women are not allowed to work together. Thus, educational policies require the separation of males and females, which means that only women can work in girls' schools and only men in boys' schools, though both boys' and girls' schools follow the same school policies, curricula, methods of assessment and internal processes. However, from a research perspective, the differences between them might affect the findings because the nature of the research was linked to principals and their freedom to make decisions and manage their schools independently. As a result, female principals faced certain barriers in this regard, especially in external contact, because men manage the majority of organisations within the country. Nevertheless, the issue is still not clear and needs further research to determine the reality of the situation. As this issue was clearly relevant and important to this research, women were included in the survey conducted in phase one of the study. However, because of gender segregation and strict social conventions, it is not possible for a man to spend time in the private company of a woman in the workplace. Therefore, regrettably, women could not be included in the interview phase of the study. This doubtless affected the study to some extent, certainly from the perspective of having prevented the researcher from gaining the detailed perceptions of female principals regarding the research issue. However, as mentioned in the recommendations of this research, it would clearly be useful to conduct a similar, complementary study that targeted female principals. This would allow findings to be compared and contrasted across both groups.

### **3.2.5 Politics**

Saudi Arabian policy is based on that of a monarchy, and decisions are mostly made in consultation between the influential members of royal family and the religious establishment, as represented by Council of Senior Scholars in some cases. The Holy Quran and Sunnah are the country's constitution, which are based on Shari'a. Political parties are illegal in Saudi

Arabia, but distinct political divisions nevertheless exist. The royal family members fill most of the important political positions in the Kingdom, and the king and the Al Saud family rule by consensus (Library of Congress, 2006). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia (2016):

*“the foreign policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is based on the principles of good-neighbour policy, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, strengthening relations with the Gulf States and the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, and strengthening relations with Arab and Islamic countries for the benefit of the common interests of these countries”.*

### **3.2.6 Economy**

Saudi Arabia was suffering economically until 1938 when oil was discovered, which inevitably led to an oil-based economy and a major economic boom in the 1970s, and which has made Saudi Arabia one of the richest countries in the world and, accordingly, a major economic influence. This massive shift in the economy enabled the government to build schools and universities. Moreover, as many people had to move away from their traditional areas to the main cities in order to work, jobs were also created for foreign workers who came to help to further develop the country (Baki, 2004).

An estimate of Saudi economic development over the last decade confirms that the 1970s boom arguably constituted an exceptional period within Saudi history. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Saudi economy was in many ways a more ordinary creature than it was 30 years ago. Though the Saudi state is still funded by oil, and business projects are generally based on oil prices, the private sector now plays a significant role in its ongoing development (Hertog, 2009).



According to the McKinsey Global Institute (2015) “an oil price boom from 2003 to 2013 fuelled rising prosperity in Saudi Arabia, which enabled it to become the world’s 19th-largest economy. GDP doubled, household income rose by 75%, and 1.7 million jobs were created for Saudis, including for a growing number of Saudi women. The government invested heavily in education, health, and infrastructure and built up reserves amounting to almost 100% of GDP in 2014” (Al-Kibsi et al., 2015, p. 7). Table 3.2 shows the Saudi Arabian GDP per capita between 2011 and 2015. The GDP has increased considerably even over these few years, reflecting the stability and strength of the Saudi economy despite the decline of the oil market and oil price instability.

*Table 3.2: Saudi Arabia GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$)*

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
\$	47,474.0	49,729.5	50,670.7	52,268.3	53,538.8

*Source: The World Bank. World Development Indicators, 2017*

In line with energy market changes, Saudi Arabia can no longer grow based purely (or at least primarily) on an oil revenue and public spending (Al-Kibsi et al., 2015). Therefore, the reform of its national economy represents the post-oil era, which is a new chapter of a smarter economy. The government announced a new \$2 trillion fund to generate more new jobs, markets, the banking industry, and to allow for further diversification of the economy and services (Khan, 2016).

The Saudi government is currently seeking to increase the contribution of small and medium enterprises in terms of overall GDP from 20% to 35% and reducing the unemployment rate from 11.6% to 7% by 2030, and also by raising women’s participation in the labour market from 22% to 30%, (Vision 2030, 2017). These strategic plans effectively announce the

beginning of a new era for the Saudi economy in terms of diversifying its sources of income and marks the attempt to gradually dispense with oil as its primary source of national income.

### **3.2.7 The Education System in Saudi Arabia**

Before oil was discovered in 1932, Saudi Arabia was a poor country and the number of schools and students was very limited. There were only 12 schools and 700 male students (Alamari, 2011). The foundation of modern Saudi education was when King Abdulaziz announced the foundation of Saudi Arabia in 1925. However, the Ministry of Education was not founded until 1953. King Fahad was the first Minister of Education, forming the initial organisational structure of the Ministry. In 1960, the General Presidency for Girls' Education was founded, followed by the Ministry of High Education in 1975 (Alharbi, 2008).

The thirteenth article of the General Principles of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (the constitution of Saudi Arabia includes eighty-three articles) has the aim of instilling Islamic faith in young people through education, and acquisition of knowledge and skills, and to prepare them to be useful members in building their society, loyal to their country and cherishing its history. Also, in its thirtieth article, the state provides for public education and commits itself to combating illiteracy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). However, to achieve these aspirations of government, education needs to be reformed because the current educational levels and student abilities are noticeably lower than the desired targets.

The first source of educational policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is Islam. Islam represents an integrated and comprehensive system of life, worship and morality, as well as education, in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, 2008). The Quran and Sunna are the sources of legislation in Saudi Arabia, and thus also form the basis of the education system. It is important to note that Islam places particular emphasis on education, which makes Islam and education

uniquely connected. Also, from the policy of education in Saudi Arabia, boys and girls are separated at all stages of their education, both in location as well as teachers. However, the Islamic principles on which education in Saudi Arabia is based on should not be an obstacle to reforming education in the era of globalisation.

### **General Education Objectives**

The objectives of the public education system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be presented as follows (Ministry of Education, 2017a):

1. Islamic goals: Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state governed by Islam in all aspects of life. The educational policy is set up based on the relevant aspects of Islam.
2. Knowledge goals: the knowledge goals of the education system in Saudi Arabia are to highlight the power of God to create the universe, and to provide individuals with useful ideas, functional experiences and the development of their skills, and ultimately to prepare them for the labour market.
3. Objectives related to skills: the necessity to acquire individual practical and behavioural skills which prepare individuals for the current and future demands of life.
4. Objectives related to behaviour: the Saudi education system seeks to help young people to achieve good and correct behaviour, respect their work and appreciate and support social solidarity.
5. Objectives related to values: the education system seeks to help the individual to respond to trends and live by cultural and religious values through an awareness of historical events

and Islamic culture. In addition, this objective is concerned with developing the student's sense of social problems and encouraging a preference for public interest over private.

Although these objectives are very impressive and comprehensive, the problem lies in their practice in reality. There is a considerable gap between theory and practice in Saudi education in this regard. It will undoubtedly require considerable effort, research, planning and changes to ways of thinking about educational reform to address such issues.

Following this brief review of the Saudi context, in the next section educational reform in Saudi Arabia will be discussed in greater detail in order to provide a better understanding of the situation in the country by indicating the links between educational reform and factors such as culture and economics. Successful educational management should be consistent with the social, economic and political philosophy of the state.

### **Education Management System**

Having discussed the Saudi context, the school management context will now be explored. The Ministry of Education is responsible for all processes and decisions relating to education in the country (Alsharari, 2010); this means that the education system is based on a centralised system. The Ministry of Education is subdivided into the School Management Department, educational districts and educational bureaus. The School Management Department includes a number of supervisors who have extensive experience in school management, and whose duties include assigning principals, setting training programmes and assessing their performance. In each district, there are two departments, one for boys' schools and the other for girls' schools. At the end of each year, the educational district appoints a committee to evaluate the performance of principals for their final report through supervision visits, the readiness to continue, and the benefit of the school (Al-Surasary & Al-Arif, 2003). All the school

systems, that is, the means by which principals and their duties are assigned and through which their performances are evaluated, are the same in all cities in Saudi Arabia. However, the school buildings, transportation to schools and Internet services are different in cities and villages. In terms of the advantages of being a principal, there are no real incentives for them to continue in their positions; they are the equals of their teaching colleagues, but with increased responsibility. In other words, they do not receive an increased salary or other benefits despite their additional duties. However, the role does have a certain perceived status within the community. Despite all these procedures, in many cases, where no-one meets the appropriate standards, any teacher can be assigned the role of principal. For example, if no-one wants to be the principal of a given school, all conditions and criteria become irrelevant because the School Management Department must find a teacher to occupy the available place.

The functions of the Ministry of Education are: setting policies at all levels; setting plans and implementing educational programmes; training and developing teachers' abilities at colleges and educational centres through specific courses; conducting research with the aim of furthering educational progress; overcoming illiteracy via specially developed courses; setting rules and regulations pertaining to the education system for both teachers and students; to collaborate with all other government organisations with the aim of improving the educational process; to provide all schools with educational requirements as needed and at the correct time; and to monitor all private educational establishments so as to ensure that high standards are maintained in their programmes, and that curricula are properly implemented and maintained (Alsharari, 2010). Considering these functions, it is clear that the Ministry of Education essentially controls all the decisions linked to schools. It is equally clear that the application of these functions is very difficult on a day to day basis due to the

extent of the associated responsibility that must be accepted by the Ministry of Education; this represents a problem for the Saudi Arabian education system. Thus, the need to grant schools greater freedom to make their own decisions appears crucial to alleviate this problem and improve the day to day functioning of schools within the country.

### **The School Inspection System in the KSA**

Educational supervision is a technical and comprehensive process that aims to evaluate and improve the educational process. Collis and Moonen (2008) argue that education supervision refers to programmes, processes and activities that are planned and carried out in order to improve and facilitate the performance of teachers. In addition, it is a function that links teachers and supervisors to improve their abilities and teaching skills to ensure that they develop new educational experiences. The supervisors' task is to visit schools and monitor the teachers' progress, assess their teaching and try to identify any obstacles and suggest solutions to solve highlighted problems (Alzahrani & Alghamdi, 2016). In other words, the most significant objectives of educational supervision are:

- To provide teachers with the necessary training in the technical aspects and practical skills of teaching.
- To provide teachers with a real opportunity for support through practical experience.
- To highlight teachers' responsibilities to all the work assigned to them, as well as the process of evaluation.
- To involve teachers in the activities within the school and in the community around them in an efficient manner (Almughidi, 2000).

In Saudi Arabia, there are 7,158 supervisors who mentor 501,111 teachers employed in public sector schools, where females represent 53 per cent and males 47 per cent of all teachers (Ministry of Education, 2016). Each supervisor is responsible for about 70 teachers. Each supervisor has usually studied the same subject as the teachers they supervise (Alzahrani & Alghamdi, 2016). Supervisors use several methods to achieve their purposes such as classroom visits and observations, supervisory discussion meeting, supervisory bulletins, directed reading, training courses, workshops and seminars, and applied lessons or models (Alkhatib, Alkhatib, & Alfareh, 2000).

However, this supervision system has been criticised from several perspectives: some supervisors cannot visit all the targeted schools or address all the questions raised by teachers (Aish, 2012; Alghamdi, 2011); observations only take place on one or two days but clearly cannot account for the days before and after their actual visit (Alger & Kopcha, 2009). Moreover, a key drawback in the current approach to the inspection of schools in Saudi Arabia is that the organisation responsible for managing education is also responsible for mentoring schools and evaluating their performance. This means that people who manage education are expected to critique themselves when they evaluate schools' and teachers' performance, which would seem highly likely to lack objectivity. Indeed, it seems that most of the reports that have been prepared during supervisor visits to schools do not instigate any real changes or actions. As a result of this supervisory process, there is a perception that there is no proper accountability within the system, and schools are not answerable to parents or the wider community.

Although the importance of school management accountability which links rewards and sanctions to expected results has been shown to be successful (Arcia, Macdonald, Patrinos, &

Porta, 2011) and imposing sanctions on the offending party whether individual or institution can produce positive results (UNESCO, 2018), in the current Saudi inspection system, there are no sanctions or incentives related to teachers' performance reports. Thus, there appears to be a key need to explore the relationship between autonomy and accountability in the current study especially as the country moves towards decentralisation. Thus, when schools are given greater autonomy they must be accountable, and in return, they must be given greater autonomy in order to make their own decisions and help them to improve their performance and students' results within their own unique contexts. This is a key issue that will be explored in this thesis.

However, there is a certain critique about school accountability, incentives and sanctions. For example, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)'s chief executive, Carole Willis, reported that "we want to create an education system that rivals the best in the world. However, too many of the incentives and sanctions are working against this ambition" (Grayson, 2019, p. 24). In another example, Ofsted's chief inspector, Amanda Spielman, in her Annual Report for 2017/18, noted that: "where (an) accountability measure becomes the sole driver of a school, college or nursery's work, their real purpose – to help young people learn and grow – is lost" (Grayson, 2019, p. 24). Thus, the shift to a new system of accountability or policy of incentives and sanctions within Saudi education should consider both these perspectives.

### **3.2.8 Education Reforms in Saudi Arabia**

As discussed in Chapter two, there many forces related to globalisation and associated theories (e.g., neoliberalism, marketisation of education, etc.) which have had an impact on the KSA's education system. More recently, the government has put plans in place to diversify



its revenue from oil, which has led to educational reform and increased investment in education as the country moves towards a knowledge-based economy. The issue of reforming education and the local and global influences are best considered in three ways. First, economically, because the price of oil has recently been particularly volatile. Thus, the Saudi government needs to find other resources via workforce diversity. They realised that education is one of the key weapons that can help the government to start the new phase of transforming their oil-based economy into a knowledge economy, as enacted through the Vision 2030 policy document (which was announced by Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in April 2016). However, current educational levels and results do not match those desired, so it has clearly become necessary to take serious steps to reform education.

Second, globalisation and some of its ideology, such as neoliberalism and the knowledge economy, are among the most important factors affecting educational reform in terms of allowing countries to compete in the global market. Therefore, Saudi Arabia realised the need to restructure the education system in order to achieve the desired objectives.

Third, as discussed in the global context chapter, decentralisation is viewed as one of the solutions that can lead to the development of education, as well as the reduction of associated spending. It is possible that decentralisation provides solutions to the two main problems mentioned previously: the low levels of education and the urgent need for its development to diversify the labour force. Therefore, shifting to decentralisation via empowering schools and granting school principals greater autonomy might be the first step toward educational reform.

As mentioned in the demography section, the largest percentage of the population in Saudi Arabia is its youth under 25 years of age at 46%. The government has realised the challenges

inherent to preparing them to compete and succeed in the coming decades. Thus, policy makers are seeking to invest in the education sector (Redden, 2016). There are three levels of education in Saudi Arabia: primary school, whose duration is six years; secondary school, whose duration is three years; and high school, whose duration is a further three years. The total number of students in 2016 was around 7.4 million, comprising all three of the above stages (General Authority for Statistics, 2017). This number represents a large proportion of the population, which increases the pressure on the government to reform education further.

The government has spent billions in recent years within the education sector to address and meet the needs of the local market and global competition with regards to the aforementioned challenges. Table 3.2 shows the budget for the state education sector over the last nine years. Education has consistently received a large share of Saudi Arabia's total budget expenditure.

*Table 3.3: Summary of the Budget Allocated to Education in KSA in US\$ billion (2008-2016)*

Year	Saudi Arabia's Total Budget Expenditure	Budget Allocated for Education and Training
2008	120	28
2009	127	33
2010	147	37
2011	154	40
2012	184	45
2013	218	54
2014	228	56
2015	191	58
2016	137	51

*Source: Ministry of Finance in Saudi Arabia (2017)*

Table 3.3 sets out a more detailed comparison of the budget allocation across key sectors in 2016, which shows that the education sector received a large portion of the total budget, confirming the government’s determination to support and reform it.

*Table 3.4: The Saudi budget for the year 2016 by sectors - Billion Dollar*

Sector	2016
General Management	6.35
Security and Military	56.89
Education	51.10
Health and social development	27.96

*Ministry of finance, 2016. The Saudi budget for the year 2016.*

The majority of previous educational reforms occurred in the era of King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz. There have been three notable educational initiatives over recent years, as follows:

The first initiative is the project of King Abdullah for the Development of General Education ‘*Tatweer*’ which included four aspects: rehabilitation of teachers and the founding of educational leadership; development of curricula; improving the educational environment; and increasing activities outside the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2008). The project considered the biggest step taken by the education development to have been during the governance of King Abdullah, in a project that later shifted to the *Tatweer* Education Holding Company, from which emerged *Tatweer* schools. The purpose of these schools is to shift from a more traditional approach to a more modern one by transferring from a centralised to a decentralised system, as will be discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter. The *Tatweer* school model is intended to empower principals and teachers in terms of their capacity to improve the learning process.

The second initiative is that of integration, combination and decentralisation. The Ministry of Education sought to standardise procedures between the relevant sectors. This has been achieved over recent years as follows:

- The focus within the Ministry of Education in developing policies and making plans and general supervision.
- Starting to measure performance through a system of performance and excellence.
- Several agencies and corresponding departments in the Ministry have been unified.
- The expansion of the authority of the directors of district education and in the authority of school principals.
- Providing schools with operating budgets.
- The districts' educational administrations for boys and girls were unified. There were originally 83 such district education administrations which became 45 under this reform.
- Competition between district education administrations and schools has been encouraged.

The third initiative was to promote private sector involvement in public education. In 2013, the Council of Ministers issued the decision to increase private sector participation in public education in order to raise its quality and efficiency whilst still offering education for free. Accordingly, the Education Evaluation Commission, *Tatweer*, and four other companies connected to the EEC were founded. These companies are the *Tatweer* for Educational Service, the *Tatweer* Building Company, Educational Transportation, and *Tatweer* Educational Technologies (Tatweer Education Holding Company, 2013).

The fourth initiative is the Education Evaluation Commission, which is an independent body with a legal personality associated directly with the Council of Ministers. It is responsible for the evaluation of public and private education in the Saudi Kingdom. The Commission also works with governmental and private institutions as related to the issuance of regulations, licenses and setting the necessary criteria for the evaluation processes at all stages (The Education Evaluation Commission, 2013). As noted, these initiatives to reform education were mostly enacted in the era of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz. In 2016, the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman enacted a holistic project to reform all sectors of the state as expressed by Vision 2030, which will be discussed below.

Despite gargantuan investment in education, the key problem with its reform in the past has been that: first, strategic plans are not based on research and feedback from experts, such as teachers or school principals; second, educational reforms have been based on the views of leaders of the Ministry of Education, rather than strategy plans. In other words, there is no institutional work in the Ministry of Education, but rather individual initiatives by Ministry leaders, most of which are neglected once they leave.

However, there is some considerable optimism that Saudi Arabia's current vision for the future, as set out in Vision 2030, will overcome all the missteps of past initiatives. This vision is widely viewed as the most ambitious set of initiatives for reform across all sectors, including education.

### **Reforming Education in Vision 2030**

Vision 2030 considers that "Saudi Arabia is the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds, the investment powerhouse, and the hub connecting three continents" (Vision 2030, 2017, para. 2). The Vision is based on three pillars that represent its value: first, the role of Saudi Arabia

as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds; second, the investment power to build a diversified and sustainable economy; and, finally, its role as an integral driver of international trade and the connection between the three continents of Africa, Asia and Europe due to its strategic location, as per Figure (3.2), Vision 2030 contains many programmes such as the National Transformation Programme 2020, fiscal balance and Aramco's strategic transformation (Vision 2030, 2017).

Figure 3.2: The pillars of Vision 2030



Source: Vision realisation programme overview, Vision 2030, 2017

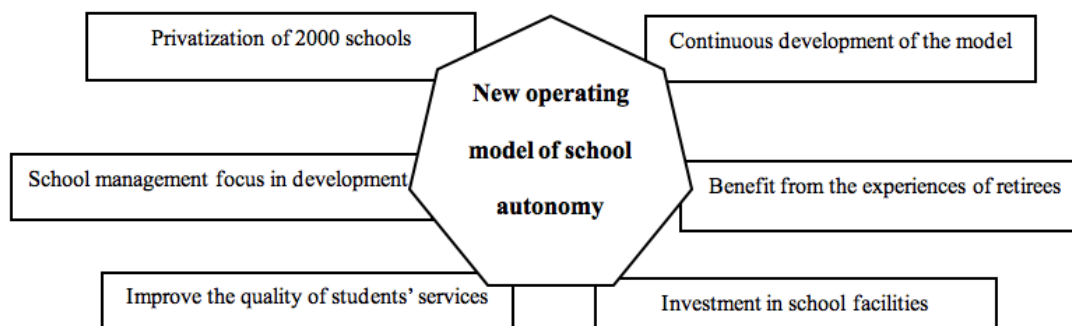
With regards to its economic aspects, the most prominent goals of Vision 2030 are to increase the government's non-oil-based income from \$163 billion to \$1 trillion, to increase the number of volunteers from one million volunteers and reduce the unemployment rate from 11 to 7%. Vision 2030 might be the greatest turning point in the history of Saudi Arabia, as Jillian (2017) states:

*“the biggest economic and social shake-up in the country’s history [in which] the minority sale would play a key role in reshaping the kingdom by contributing billions of dollars to its sovereign wealth fund”.*

Vision 2030 seeks to provide educational opportunities for all in an appropriate educational environment in the light of the Saudi Kingdom’s educational policy, raising the quality of its outputs, increasing the effectiveness of scientific research, encouraging creativity and innovation, developing the social partnership and improving the skills and abilities of educational staff. The Vision includes, first, a comprehensive view of the education sector, beginning with the development of the educational system in all its components that will enable schools to cooperate with families and build leading figures, and develop a wide range of cultural, social, sports and recreational activities. Second, it allows for cooperation with the private sector and non-profit sector in terms of providing more programmes and events. The third is promoting the educational partnership, qualifying teachers and educational leaders and developing appropriate curricula. Fourth, it seeks to align the outputs of the educational sector with the needs of the labour market through the “TAQAT” portal. Finally, it will provide students with the knowledge and skills needed for future jobs, and ensure that every child can gain a quality education.

Of special interest to this thesis is the announcement in 2017 of the National Transition 2020 Programme for the Development of Education, otherwise known as the "ERTIQA" project. As Figure (3.3) shows, this incorporates a new project that the Ministry of Education started in 2016 under the name “autonomous schools”, which aims to move from a centralised to a decentralised system and improve education through aspects such as the school environment, a focus on development, raising educational quality, and investing in school facilities.

Figure 3.3: School autonomy (new operating model)



Source: Ministry of Education, 2017b

Although this model bears the name school autonomy, there is no sign of independence in decision making, indicating that the Ministry of Education is still uncertain about the complete shift of the decision-making process to the schools themselves. In terms of school management, the model includes the term “School management focus in development” but the actual meaning of this remains vague and unclear. It appears that this term has nothing to do with transforming the decision-making process.

In the same trend, the Ministry of Education, as based on Vision 2030, reformulated the goal related to education and divided it into two aspects, those of developing educational processes and developing educational management. The development of educational processes will be achieved through:

1. Building curriculum philosophy and its policies, objectives, the ways in which they will be developed and mechanisms for activating them, and linking this to programmes of teacher professional development.
2. Improving teaching methods that make the learner the centre rather than the teacher, and focussing on building skills, refining student personality, instilling confidence, and building the spirit of creativity.



3. Building a stimulating, attractive school environment linked to a full service support system.
4. Including education for people with special needs, and providing suitable support within all categories.
5. Providing pre-primary education opportunities and expanding them, providing nurseries and kindergartens and activating their association with the education system.

Similarly, the development of educational management will be achieved through:

1. Reforming the school as an educational institution that refines talent, provides skills and produces an aspiring generation who can face challenges, and enjoy competition, work and production.
2. Emphasise discipline in the educational system, seriousness in educational practice, activating activities and attending courses and events.
3. The restructuring of the education sector, and formulation of the system and regulations, instructions and executive rules that control the development of curricula and the employment of teachers in the educational scope. Organising the process of educational supervision and raising the effectiveness of training development on a continual basis.
4. Raising the efficiency of operational performance, spending the budget in an appropriate manner, and improving human resource, equipment and buildings (Ministry of Education, 2017b).

Furthermore, the plan aims to involve families in 80% of the school activities regarding their children's learning, as well as a set of indicators by which to measure and review educational outputs on an annual basis (Vision 2030, 2017).

Nonetheless, these goals need to be revised to include key elements that are aligned with school autonomy as set out in the National Transition 2020 Programme for the Development of Education which are decision making and accountability (Ministry of Education, 2017b). There is an intention to shift from a top-down decision-making process to complete decentralisation. However, insufficient attention has been given to the practical steps required for this process to proceed in an efficient manner. This raises the question: should the government take more concrete steps to understand how principals view school autonomy, their current preparedness for school autonomy, their skills, as well as their views on the support they may need when school autonomy is implemented? As the current study is concerned with school autonomy, it has implications for the successful implementation of the National Transition 2020 Programme and the educational reforms contained within Vision 2030.

Although the "autonomous schools" project was announced by the Ministry of Education in 2016 as part of Vision 2030, the approval of the Saudi Council of Ministers to implement these schools was only issued on 1/5/2018. The Ministry of Education will now transfer 25 public schools in five educational districts to autonomous schools (operated by the private sector in relation to administrative and financial independence) to enhance academic standards and produce better results. The Ministry of Education revealed that the next step of the implementation will be to target a further 2000 schools. These schools will be selected by the Ministry, as based on certain criteria, and then handed over to small companies to be managed by individuals who have significant experience in education. The Ministry will also

ensure flexibility in their curricula and programmes and will grant these schools greater freedom to achieve their goals. Although the programme of autonomous schools has been approved, the schools and education districts that will effectively act as pilots to the scheme have not yet been selected (Ministry of Education, 2018).

There are two key points to be made here. First, according to initial information, autonomy in these schools will only pertain to their administrative and financial aspects (Ministry of Education, 2018). This means that, in the first stage of the programme, autonomy will only be partially granted, rather than completely so. The notion of gradual implementation will be explored in the current study and is discussed fully in the findings and discussion chapters of this thesis. The second point is that although there has been a lot of rhetoric about this new scheme, it seems that there may be quite a gulf between what is espoused through key documents released by the Ministry in relation to granting school autonomy and what is actually happening on the ground in schools. This is another key issue that this study aims to explore.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

This chapter sought to provide insight into the Saudi context of the study through a discussion of its geographic and strategic location, demography, history, social context, politics and economy in order to offer a more nuanced understanding of contextual factors influencing educational reforms in the KSA. It highlighted many shortcomings of previous policy initiatives. One major criticism is that previous reforms have not been adequately underpinned by appropriate research nor have they considered the views of experts or practitioners in the field (e.g., school principals). The chapter discussed the new vision currently being enacted by the Saudi government, Vision 2030, and the National Transition 2020 Programme for the Development of Education, which is in line with the purpose of this study, namely that of

exploring the impact of implementing autonomy on school performance. These initiatives are expected to play a significant role in reforming education over the coming years. In conclusion, school autonomy is a fruitful area of research. The following chapter will present the theoretical framework of the study.

## Chapter 4: Conceptual and Theoretical framework

### 4.1 Introduction

The Saudi education system is moving from a highly centralised to a decentralised model, as discussed in Chapter two. This thesis investigates the perceived impact of the current centralised educational system on school principals' management roles and the extent to which they feel prepared for greater autonomy. In order to address this issue, it is essential to explore school leaders' experiences of educational reform in Saudi Arabia and their views on reform. The thesis seeks to provide new theoretical insights into this area by using a conceptual framework which draws on theories concerned with decision making, autonomy and accountability. The rationale underlying this conceptual framework emerged through their relationship to the study as well as the fact that they are important components of the educational reform required under decentralisation. This is further justified as follows. First, it can be argued that "decision making is the heart of administration" (Simon, 1976). It can be further suggested that leadership and administration may be defined as decision making (Johnson & Kruse, 2012). In addition, "Deciding is a *sine qua non* of educational administration because the school, like all formal organisations, is basically a decision-making structure" (Miskel & Hoy, 2007, p. 329). Second, this thesis is aligned with the view that building an efficient administration that reflects the needs of its community is only possible under decentralised management, which would ensure recognition of autonomy in local administration. Thus, enhancing local autonomy through the transfer of new skills in the process of decentralisation has become more significant, especially at present when local administration is currently subject to real reform and restructuration (Zaharia, 2012). Third, "the single most important factor in ensuring the success or failure of a reform is the way the accountability relationships are set to work within each of the models and provides some

lessons on how to get these relationships to work effectively” (Di Gropello, 2004, p. II). Indeed, accountability is a fundamental element of the framework that could help assess the effectiveness of decentralisation (Agrawal & Ribot, 2002). Each of these concepts (decision making, autonomy and accountability) are linked to each other; this relationship will be explained later in this chapter.

The chapter is divided into three sections for organisational purposes. However, it is acknowledged that they are interlinked and there is an overlap between them. Each section is devoted to one concept and begins with definitions, followed by relevant theories and then a review of the previous studies relating to the concept in an educational context.

## **4.2 Decision Making**

### **4.2.1 Definitions**

Put simply, the term ‘decision making’ refers to a choice between alternatives (Moorhead, Griffith, Irving, & Coleman, 2000). For example, Harvey’s (2007) definition of effective decision-making views this as the process through which alternatives are selected and then managed through implementation to achieve objectives.

These definitions consider that information should be accessible to the decision maker in order for them to properly evaluate the situation and chose an appropriate course of action. This view is supported by Kedia, Nordtvedt & Perez (2002), who argued that traditional decision-making theories recommend that when facing uncertainty, decision makers should search for additional relevant information. However, decision making is not just about selecting the correct choices or compromises. Unless a decision has ‘degenerated into work’, it is not a decision. It is at best a good intention since effective decisions result from a

systematic process, with clearly defined elements, that is handled in a distinct sequence of steps (Harvey, 2007). In the centralised system, it seems impossible that decision makers in the higher echelons of the system can gather information for each problem or case that requires a decision to be made at the school level. Thus, devolving the process of decision making to subordinates (in education to school management) seems more logical.

Second, the term 'decision making' has come to be used to refer to a rational process that has some well-arranged steps in which each step is built on the previous one. This body of work places specific emphasis on notions of rational decision making. Hoy and Tarter (2010) define decision making as "rational, deliberative, purposeful action, beginning with the development of a decision strategy and moving through implementation and appraisal of results" (p. 124). Beach and Connolly (2005), Robbins (2005) and Bratton, Sawchuk, Forshaw, Callinan and Corbett (2010) take this further by setting out the stages and steps of the process of decision making, which are: understanding the situation and the problem; describing all possible alternative actions that might be taken; evaluating the advantages and disadvantages for every possible option as compatible with the goals of the organisation; and following-up and evaluating the decision. However, these four steps cannot be applied in schools in light of the current system of centralisation. The high-echelon decision makers in the central system make decisions about the school without the full set of knowledge needed to fulfil some of these steps, which can lead to inappropriate decisions. By comparison, the school leader is in an entirely appropriate position to make decisions that require contextual knowledge. Accordingly, it is argued that shifting to decentralisation and granting school leaders more authority will help improve the decision-making processes within schools.

Third, the term 'decision making' is synonymous with management, to the extent that management is often viewed as decision making (Simon, 1997). Johnson and Kruse (2012)

argued that “decision-making lies at the heart of managerial behaviour in all organisations” (p. 26). Also, Berber (1996) claims that the decision-making process is essentially the essence of the administrative process and its axis. Administrative practice requires confronting a wide range of everyday situations which need the selection of the most appropriate alternative(s) as to what should be done. Therefore, the relationship between decision making and management demonstrates the importance of decision making within the school via the school management, and which would only be possible under the umbrella of decentralisation.

While a variety of definitions of the term ‘decision making’ have been discussed, this thesis will use the definition suggested by Simon (1997), namely that the decision-making process is a series of sequential steps: a problem is identified; goals and objectives are established; all the possible alternatives are generated; the consequences of each alternative are considered; all the alternatives are evaluated in terms of the goals and objectives; the best alternative is selected; and, finally, the decision is implemented and evaluated.

#### **4.2.2 Rationale for Decision Making - Theoretical perspectives**

The rationality and importance for the adoption of decision making within schools is apparent for many reasons. First, the decision maker must be close to the events that help them to make the right decisions. This view confirmed by Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011), who confirmed that the presence of the decision maker at the place of work allowed them to deal with crises quickly and effectively. One explanation for the importance of a decision maker’s presence *in situ* is that the decision maker must know all available alternatives before making a decision in order to maximise its benefits. Barros (2010) supported this view when he



discussed Herbert A. Simon's conception of rationality in two of its principal general definitions: bounded rationality and procedural rationality, stating that:

*Global rationality, the rationality of neoclassical theory, assumes that the decision maker has a comprehensive, consistent utility function, knows all the alternatives that are available for choice, can compute the expected value of utility associated with each alternative, and chooses the alternative that maximises expected utility. Bounded rationality, a rationality that is consistent with our knowledge of actual human choice behaviour, assumes that the decision maker must search for alternatives, has egregiously incomplete and inaccurate knowledge about the consequences of actions, and chooses actions that are expected to be satisfactory (Barros, 2010, p. 460)*

From another angle, Simon (1960) proposed three steps should be adopted to execute decision-making processes which are intelligence, design and choice. These three phases are involved in identifying the need for a decision and include investigating and developing the problem area and alternatives then finally describe the activity of selecting the most appropriate option of action from the created alternatives (Dillon, 1998). Simon's view is to some extent supported by Klein (1999), who argued that the context in which a problem is posed is fundamental. This means that decision makers should understand the context of a situation, the probabilities of its outcomes and its ultimate solution. Klein (1999) also argued that the decision-making process does not follow a hard method of solution identification, which is a key stage of mainstream decision-making theories.

Moreover, prospect theory "was developed by Kahneman and Tversky (1979, 1988, 1981) to explain the results of experiments with decision-based problems that were stated in terms of

monetary outcomes and objective probabilities” (Hansson, 1994, p. 47), supported the view of emphasising that a leader facing a decision task should evaluate each possible decision using a rating function then selecting the decision that has the highest rating. In other words, the decision-making practice includes the skill of assessing alternatives, of looking deeply into each possible choice and selecting the most likely decision to succeed. However, decision making in education central system negates these advantages by restricting the choice of the decision to the highest authority, and in this instance to an authority that does not really have sufficient information to make such decisions. Thus, the decision maker should be near the situation, and when the problem becomes well-known, he or she draws up multiple solution scenarios and evaluates them until they are comfortable with one of them.

The second rational reason of implementing decision making within schools is that this would speed the decision-making process up; indeed, some scholars have argued that the speed at which decisions can be made can have an influence on the results. Although most research that has been undertaken in this study is in a school context, there is some evidence that draw on from studies in corporate settings in this regard. Eisenhardt (1989) contends that the faster the decision-making process, the better. His research showed that the more successful companies analyse more relevant data, consider multiple alternatives simultaneously, and make faster decisions. This idea was supported by Baum and Wally (2003), who concluded that faster decision making has a positive impact on profitability and growth. Thus, the speed of DM could be considered a factor affecting the performance of the organisation. Furthermore, the decision-making process can be applied faster in a decentralised system compared to a centralised one. This supports the aim of this study, which is transferring decision making from the top down may positively affect the performance of the school. The

current central education system makes the decision-making process very slow, hampering the performance of the school.

The third logical motive to transferring the decision-making process to the school is that, in effective leadership, the leader must have an essential role in decision making, as well as involving others in the process where necessary. Gray (1990) demonstrated the significance of the role that leadership plays in schools' effectiveness and how the style of leadership can be linked with this effectiveness. Also, Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore (1995) summarised the traits of effective leadership through three concepts: the strength of goals, involving others in decision making, and having a professional authority in the processes of teaching and learning. Likewise, Wallin (2003) insisted that "Principals must become more than mere puppets that follow orders emanating from a nation's capital" (p. 62). School leaders need to have more power and authority to make their own decisions, otherwise, they might lose their motivation and become less ambitious, both for themselves and their institutions. Although the literature emphasises the importance of decision making within the school and the need to shift to decentralisation, autonomy and decision making are complex matters and must be understood in relation to each other (Steinberg, 2014).

#### **4.2.3 Decision Making in the Saudi Education System**

The Saudi education system is managed through five hierarchical levels: the first is the Council of Ministers, also called the Cabinet, which consists of the Prime Minister (the King), the Deputy Prime Minister (the Crown Prince), 21 other ministers with portfolio, and seven ministers of state. The Council are responsible for drawing up educational policies and is the reference for all financial and administrative affairs in the Education Ministry. The Council of Ministers monitors the implementation of regulations and decisions within the country by

establishing committees to investigate the progress made by the minister and other related agencies, or otherwise for specific cases when such need arises. These committees submit the results of their inquiries to the Council, after which the Council considers the results of its investigations and may establish commissions of inquiry and decide on a suitable outcome (Shura Council, 2018). The Council of Ministers also consider the recommendations of the Shura Council, where the latter consists of a chairman and 150 members selected by the King from appropriate scholars, experts and specialists. The Council is further responsible for discussing the annual reports submitted by the ministries and other government agencies and proposes appropriate courses of action and provides the Council of Ministers with recommendations to help them reach appropriate decisions (Shura Council, 2018).

The second level is the Ministry of Education, whose responsibilities are focussed on the translation of educational policy to plans, programmes and educational projects, according to national aspirations and goals. The third level is the education districts. There are 46 districts in Saudi Arabia, in each of which there is an education department that manages education within the district, and which organizes and coordinates how each of the schools in the district works. The fourth level is that of the education bureaus. There are 257 education bureaus, 177 for male schools (84 of which supervise both male and female schools) and 80 for female schools. These bureaus represent the link between the schools and the education district departments, and help schools to implement educational programmes, projects, and activities. They also assess the performance of schools, principals and teachers (General Secretariat of Education Departments, 2018).

The fifth level is that of the individual schools, whose principals are each given limited authority and responsibilities for managing their schools. As the Saudi education system has

traditionally been centralized, the powers available to school leaders were historically determined by the Ministry of Education based on need. However, as the country moves towards decentralising education decision making to a more local level, headteachers are being granted greater autonomy in order to make more decisions within and about their schools; this empowerment will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

### **Principal Empowerment**

The empowerment of school principals has been developed in several different stages over recent years as a result of changes in educational policy as the country has adopted a more locally run system. In 1925, or the beginning of formal education in Saudi Arabia, school principals had no specific authority, with decisions being generally up to personal judgment (Alotaibi, 2013). In 1953, which saw the establishment of national education systems, no specific authority was granted to school principals, but rather powers were granted as needed (Ibid). After about five decades, in 2001, the Ministry of Education conferred 22 administrative authorities to the principals of all schools in the Kingdom (Meemar, 2014). In 2011, the Ministry of Education announced 52 new authorities for school principals, including new financial and administrative powers; a year later, the Ministry granted the school principals 23 further authorities that allowed even greater autonomy than the 2011 reforms, one such being curriculum planning and the ability to nominate particular teachers for participation in external training programmes (Alromaih, 2017). Also, later in the same year, the Ministry of Education granted school principals nine technical authorities (Meemar, 2014).

The last update to this authority was in January 2016 when the Ministry of Education granted schools principals 60 authorities (Ministry of Education, 2017). These powers included the ability to prepare a plan for the school and distributing tasks and training programmes, following up on work performance and providing for physical and human needs, preparing

required reports, making deductions from salaries because of absences, and managing and distributing the school maintenance budget.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education has attempted to empower school principals as discussed above. This empowerment has emerged due to the aspirations of the Ministry of Education with regards to decentralisation in which decision-making is being shifted to schools. However, the problem is that school principals are currently dissatisfied with the original authorities conferred by the Ministry of Education (Alzaidi, 2008), including financial authority (Allheaniy, 2012). This perception can be explained by the fact that these authorities do not represent any real power and are instead just administrative functions which do not have any major effect on educational outcomes (Algarni & Male, 2014).

It has been argued that in order to be successful, educational managers should have full control over their work, be given more challenging tasks, be rewarded for competence and innovation, be allowed to enhance their knowledge and skills, and be allowed to take on creative problem-solving (Smith & Greyling, 2007). In addition, the lack of real empowerment of school principals may affect their abilities to innovate and be creative because “empowering leadership positively affected psychological empowerment, which in turn influenced both intrinsic motivation and creative process engagement” (Zhang & Bartol, 2010, p. 107). Thus, the current study aims to explore the current reality of empowerment in schools. In addition, it will investigate the readiness of school principals to be granted greater authority to lead schools autonomously. Furthermore, the study seeks to investigate the perceived impact of the reform.

#### **4.2.4 Review of empirical research on decision making**

This section will review previous studies concerned with decision making, first in international contexts and then in the Middle East region. Trimmer (2013) conducted a study in 34 independent public schools to examine the impact of providing public schools in Western Australia with greater autonomy, devolution of decision making, flexibility, and accountability as a means for improving student achievement over time. The study argued experimentation and risk taking as key aspects of effective educational leadership while engaging in discussions about authority among local leadership in schools. The study found with the increasing diversity in schools and the call for addressing specific regional needs that decentralised regulation of the education system is often proposed as an alternative approach to achieve school improvement. Trimmer's study is almost identical to the current study in this regard. Its results provide support for the view that autonomy can improve student achievement. However, the difference with these studies is that the cultural context in Australia clearly differs from that of Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Trimmer's study investigates a project on independent public schools, and is thus quite focussed, while this study is much broader.

Drawing briefly on international business research, Bashir (2015) studied the impact of decentralised decision making on a firm's performance through giving the opportunity to each employee to participate in decision making and give them the freedom to make their own decisions in favour of their firm. They took the examples of Honeywell, Google, Toyota and different sectors of Pakistan. They found that that the performances of these firms increased with increasing decentralisation. The positive impact of decentralisation on performance, as per the study by Bashir (2015), is consistent with the hypothesis of the current study that decentralisation in education will improve school performance.

In the Arabic context, Abu Al-Ula (2003) conducted a study to identify the reality of the process of decision making in educational management with regards to school management. Also, an attempt was made to identify the problems that limited the effectiveness of the decision-making process and formulate some suggestions to improve it. The study found that such success depends on the school leader's capability to make appropriate decisions that involved the participation with others.

Al-Saud (2009) conducted a study to explore the reality of the subordinate's participation in decision making and its relation to job satisfaction. The participants of the study gained job satisfaction because of their participation in decision-making processes. It concluded that most subordinates appreciate the opportunity to participate in decision-making at all levels of administration.

Halaq (2012) conducted a study to explore the requirements of achieving decentralisation in educational management in primary and secondary schools in Syria from the perceptions of their school leaders and to what extent these requirements could be achieved. He used a descriptive analytical method and a survey, finding that there are four needs that need to be met to achieve decentralisation: knowledge, organisation, infrastructure and qualified staff.

Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) conducted a descriptive research effort to recognise the reality of decision making in primary schools and the level of authority granted to school leaders to make decisions in their place of work. They gathered the data from the formal documents and interviews with some schools' principals. The study concluded that decision making in the place work allowed crises to be dealt with quickly and effectively. They also found that the professional training for school leaders is essential to prepare them for greater autonomy.



There is a similarity between prior research and the current study, the results presented by Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) and the views expressed by Klein (1999) in the sense of “the context in which the problem is posed is fundamental”. The presence of a decision maker in the relevant location makes him or her familiar with the context of the problem, which allows a decision to be made much more quickly and effectively. Therefore, the decisions within the school should be made autonomously by the school management in order to achieve better outcomes.

Shabat (2015) conducted a study to determine the requirements of applying the decentralisation approach in an academic context in Gaza. The population of the study was 19 employees from the high and middle levels of administration in the Faculty of Namma. The study used the descriptive approach to analyse data collected by survey. The study found that 76.3% of the administration were in favour of a transfer and delegation of authority.

Al-Balawi and Ahmad (2016) conducted a study to identify the requirements to empowering female administrative leaders in Tabuk University. The study used the descriptive method by conducting a survey and interviews with 41 leaders. The study found that administrative leaders were willing to achieve the requirements to have more authority and been empowered.

Al-Muhailbi, Al-Hajeri, and Ibraheem (2016) conducted a study that investigated the perspectives of male and female school principals with regards to decentralisation in education and its implementation in Kuwait. Also, it identified several advantages and disadvantages of giving schools more authority and autonomy. A questionnaire was used to collect their data, the principal finding of which was that most school principals understand

school autonomy to be a positive approach to decision making, especially in the areas of student affairs and teacher professional development.

Considering all of the above previous studies in terms of their aims, contexts, and methods, key results of these studies will be discussed and a rationale for the current study provided.

First, in terms of the aims of the studies, Trimmer (2013), Bashir (2015) and Al-Muhailbi et al. (2016) aimed to examine the impact of decentralisation on performance. Abu Al-Ula (2003), Al-Saud (2009) and Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) aimed to identify the reality of decision making. While, Halaq (2012), Shabat (2015) and Al-Balawi and Ahmad (2016) aimed to explore the requirements of achieving decentralisation. However, the current study includes the three above issues; the impact of decentralisation on performance, the reality of decision making and the requirements of the implementation.

Second, regarding the methods used, Trimmer (2013), Halaq (2012), Shabat (2015) and Al-Muhailbi et al. (2016) used a survey method. Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) used formal documents and interviews, whilst only Al-Balawi and Ahmad (2016) used mixed methods in the form of survey and interviews, the latter being the same methods as the current study, though the previous authors' study context was targeting a university.

Third, with respect to studies' contexts, Trimmer (2013) was in Australia and Bashir (2015) was in Pakistan. The rest of the studies were in the Arabic context, only two of which were in KSA context (Al-Saud, 2009; Al-Balawi & Ahmad, 2016). However, none of these studies targeted schools. Thus, the current study will fill this gap of knowledge.

Finally, these studies can be summarised in three key results. Al-Saud (2009), Bashir (2015) and Trimmer (2013) were in a different context, but they found that decentralisation has a

positive impact on performance, achievement and job satisfaction. Abu Al-Ula (2003), Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) and Halaq (2012) indicated the key needs of decentralisation, which are knowledge, organisation, infrastructure and qualified staff and professional training. Shabat (2015), Al-Balawi and Ahmad (2016) and Al-Muhailbi et al. (2016) confirmed the motives of participants toward decentralisation and that they would be willing to achieve whatever might be required in order to have more authority. However, the current study will investigate all these three points: the motivation of shifting to decentralisation; its impact on performance; and the key needs for its implementation.

### **4.3 Autonomy**

#### **4.3.1 Definitions**

Autonomy is used in various contexts and is a relatively complex idea. A number of previous studies have used it to explain decentralised management, such as with the local management of schools or autonomous schools (Levacic, 1995). The different meanings are linked to specific contexts. It seems that a certain differentiation between similar terms is necessary to remove any associated ambiguity. For instance, Caldwell (2002) states that a self-managing school is not always an autonomous school, because the majority of such schools work within an overall system of schools, such as a district education authority. Autonomous schools are allowed to govern themselves as they want, determine their own goals, approaches and programmes (Diggory, 2005).

There is no specific definition of autonomy because there are many levels of autonomy or decision-making authority at various levels of school administration (Bush & Bell, 2002). Diggory (2005) indicated that the practical definition of autonomy should focus on the level of autonomy rather than any specific definition. This particular perspective has a degree of

logic because defining the term 'autonomy' will change according to circumstance, processes, operations, goals and decisions. It is clear that the degree of autonomy is a significant aspect of the definition, but the term "school autonomy" itself assumes that schools have the power to make all decisions, regardless of the level of autonomy. It could, however, be better to focus both on the level of autonomy and the specific definition of this, to help with the understanding of this term.

Hentschke and Davies (1997) used a classification of managerial decisions which focussed on the degree of autonomy rather than other considerations. Classification of managerial decisions might help with the gradual application of autonomy. According to the Longman dictionary (2003), autonomy is the freedom that a place or an organisation has to govern or control itself, or the ability or opportunity to make one's own decision without being controlled by anyone else. Recently, Cheng, Ko, & Lee (2016) defined school autonomy as the decentralisation of authority "by relocating power structures from central or regional offices to school sites to enable school stakeholders to make their own decisions about resource use and school operations in a rapidly changing academic environment" (p. 179). This study will define the term "autonomy" as follows: empowering and granting schools all the necessary authority for decision making on related processes in light of educational policies.

Although some definitions are discussed above, in this thesis, the term "School Autonomy" will be used to refer to a form of school management in which schools are given decision-making authority over their operations, including the hiring and firing of personnel, and the assessment of teachers and pedagogical practices.

*School management under autonomy may increase the significance of the role of the School Council, namely that of representing the interests of parents in budget*

*planning and approval, as well as a voice/vote in personnel decisions. By including the School Council in school management, school autonomy fosters accountability (Arcia et al., 2011, p. 2).*

#### **4.3.2 History of School Autonomy**

There have been many different reasons which have ultimately encouraged governments to grant schools more autonomy. According to Coghlan and Desurmont (2007), autonomous schools were opened in Europe throughout the nineteenth century in order to expand academic freedom and for religious reasons. This remained until the 1990s when the school autonomy system became the ideal way to manage public funds via a top-down model of the decision-making paradigm (Coghlan & Desurmont, 2007). In contrast, in some developing countries such as Latin America, the motivations for such were political and based on need. There was a demand to provide populations with a basic education in regions which state education could not meet (Arcia et al., 2011). School management systems have changed over recent decades and transferred gradually from the traditional approaches to one of autonomy. The development of school autonomy has led to a new system of school management, School-Based Management (SBM), which grants schools, parents and the community the right to be involved with the majority of managerial decisions (Patrinos & Fasih, 2009).

There have been some attempts in recent years to grant schools greater autonomy, but only to a certain extent depending on circumstances. For example, school principals in Greece, Turkey, Ireland, Germany, Belgium and Romania reported similar levels of autonomy in allocating resources while in Chile, Peru, Indonesia, the Czech Republic, the United Arab Emirates, Macao-China, the United Kingdom and the Slovak Republic, some schools' decisions

are made by national or regional education authorities, while others are allowed to allocate resources schools themselves. As another example, the move to school autonomy in Chicago took place in 2005-2006 (Steinberg, 2014). The impact was not clear in the first two years, perhaps because the new policy needed time to become more accepted among staff, teachers, students, and local communities. It also might be that schools were successful before applying the autonomy system and any improvement was therefore not particularly tangible. Education in America is generally quite sophisticated; however, the project attempted to grant schools greater authority and the freedom to manage all their operations.

In an Arabic context, in Qatar, where the culture and social life are similar to those in Saudi Arabia, the Qatari government started Education for a New Era (ENE) in 2001 and established independent schools as part of that project. These schools were made responsible for choosing teachers and teaching approaches, and for setting the rules to deal with students' issues, all due consideration for international standards. In addition, they set accountability systems to assess the level of success according to student achievement (Yamani, 2006). However, a number of Qatari academics and educational experts emphasised the fact that school autonomy in Qatar has since returned to the centralised system after the expected results were not achieved. Despite this, the Qatari experiment has played a significant role in improving student performance and has encouraged creativity and innovation. There are many reasons that may account for the lack of success in Qatar. Firstly, if the experiment is applied in a short timeframe across a large number of schools without assessing the associated steps and performance thoroughly, the outcomes will clearly not be as planned. Secondly, if the public is not satisfied with the utility of the experiment from the outset, they might resist its implementation. Finally, if the marketing of the idea is not appropriate, it may not be accepted purely due to a lack of understanding as to its intentions. All the above are clear

indicators that some sectors of the community are dissatisfied with the idea. In addition, some academics indicated that the existence of a state of confusion in the preparation of curricula and teaching in several independent school policies became an obvious justification for returning to centralisation. Moreover, some traditional and constant values of society will be either challenged or affected through designing and teaching certain materials. Such an experiment should be assessed and tested before being generalised.

The school autonomy system links to new public management. As Hood (2001) indicated, there are five aspects that should be applied to managing the needs of the public. These include: putting the clients at the heart of the process; moving responsibilities to low levels of management which deal with activities; granting communities the ability to assess the government workers; improving the quality of performance and considering the efficiency of work; evaluating outcomes through achievement; and abandoning traditional approaches. The public services target individuals, who have the right to make decisions about what they need, such as education and health. Schooling is one of the most significant and fundamental of public services, thus the school autonomy system appears to give communities the opportunity to contribute to the associated decision-making processes.

#### **4.3.3 Rationale for Autonomy - Theoretical Perspectives**

Autonomy is adopted in certain schooling systems for many reasons. Firstly, with regard to personal characteristics, individual freedom in decision making is cited as an important variable affecting confidence and self-actualisation. Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1981) suggest that “as individuals mature, they move to stages of functioning independent of group influence, which again supports notions of individualistic consumerism rather than consumerism based upon the satisfaction of populations” (p. 66 as cited in Bottery, 2004).

Also, it seems that Maslow's theory (1943) of needs, such as self-actualisation needs, supports the perception that autonomy and freedom have a positive influence on job satisfaction. Maslow's theory emphasised the idea that individuals require freedom in their workplaces to encourage creativity (AlKandari, 2013). Therefore, on a personal level, principals need independence that will help them to carry out their leadership duties. Despite the importance of the independence of the school, this does not mean not being held accountable, because autonomy and accountability are theoretically and practically connected.

The second logical interpretation of autonomy is individual freedom, which is one of the principles of the neoliberal theory that is based on it (Kotz, 2002). In addition, other research indicates that the autonomous and self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to freedom of choice (Gill & Scharff, 2011). Research shows that to satisfy the need for self-actualisation, people should exercise their full abilities (Hanson, 2003). Therefore, school principals cannot exercise their capabilities to their fullest under the centralised system, but rather need more freedom and autonomy to be able to do so. I would argue that the need for autonomy in schools gives principals the opportunity to manage their schools freely, as apart from centralisation. Thus, autonomy can be seen as an approach that helps lower managerial levels deal with any issues and problems within a reasonable and appropriate timeframe (Hanson, 1997).

The third rational interpretation for the use of autonomy is that it is an incentive and key factor in the expression of creativity. Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) argued that most of the incentives that affect learning outcomes are institutional in nature, which are, in particular: a) choice and competition, b) school autonomy, and c) school accountability. Other researchers perceive autonomy as the main factor in facilitating creativity (Craft, 2005). It has been suggested that where the government is unable to grant school principals incentives



under the centralised system due to financial issues, moving to a decentralisation system may solve this problem, even if only partially.

The fourth reason for adopting autonomy in schools is that parents and students can evaluate the performance of their school and be involved in any associated decision-making. Beyond participation in decision making within schools, parents, charities, teachers or other independent organisations can set up institutions such as ‘free schools’ and ‘academies’ in England (Turner, 2012). In addition, granting schools greater autonomy not only expands parents’ choices but also pushes schools to improve their performances (Patrinos & Fasih, 2009). Therefore, the World Development Report (2004) suggests that “good quality and timely service provision can be ensured if service providers can be held accountable to their clients” (World Bank, 2003b).

#### **4.3.4 Review of Empirical Research on Autonomy**

This section will review previous studies to examine autonomy, first in an international context and then more specifically in the Middle East region. In American and Australian, for example, Su, Gamage and Mininberg (2003) asked principals why they wanted to become principals, where having a personally satisfying job and to provide effective leadership were found to be the most common reasons. Leaders seek effectiveness through their jobs, though some might suffer from centralisation. Effective leaders need appropriate authority in order to make appropriate decisions. However, in a centralised system, principals suffer from a lack of delegated authority, despite having the ability as individuals to be more effective.

Machin and Silva (2013) conducted a study to identify settings in which alternative and more autonomous school arrangements could improve the educational attainment of pupils in the bottom section of the achievement distribution. They surveyed the UK-based literature on

school structures and school autonomy, and presented new evidence on the effect of school academies on the age-16 GCSE attainment of students of different abilities up to 2009, that is, the year before the Coalition Government changed the nature of the Labour academy programme. The findings showed that schools that converted to academies between 2002 and 2007 improved their overall age-16 GCSE results by further raising the attainments of students in the top half of the ability distribution, and in particular pupils in the top 20%. It found little evidence that academies helped students in the bottom 10% and 20% of the ability distribution. Finally, it found little evidence that late converters (2008 and 2009) had any beneficial effects on pupils of any ability. The most important related finding of this study is, although the only limited authority granted to the school academies, such as staff management, taught curriculum, length of the school day and other aspects of their day-to-day functioning (Machin & Silva, 2013), their effect on student attainment was obvious.

A study in Sweden by Bohlmark and Lindahl (2015) estimated the effects on educational outcomes from the expansion of the autonomous school sector in Sweden. It found that an increase in the share of independent school students improves average short- and long-term outcomes. However, autonomous schools took time to become anything more than a marginal phenomenon in Sweden. Bohlmark and Lindahl research illustrated a fundamental issue, namely that it took long time until the impact of autonomous schools in Sweden become noticeable.

In the context of England, Greany and Waterhouse (2016) conducted a study to describe and analyse the development of school autonomy, school leadership and curriculum innovation in England over the past 40 years. They found, that “leadership agency by principals and their professional teams is more important than policy/legal freedoms for securing curriculum innovation and such agency appears to depend on the capacity and confidence of leaders to

shape an alternative and innovative curriculum in the face of structural constraints” (p. 1188). The findings of this study are consistent with the theory on which this study is based, in that leaders can bring change to education and improve school performance.

A further study was conducted by Ko, Cheng, and Lee (2016) to trace the development of school autonomy and accountability and related multiple changes and impacts in key areas of school education in Hong Kong since the implementation of school-based management (SBM) in the 1990s. They found that the positive effects that school autonomy has on school governance and management, teachers’ work, school-based curricula and student learning are all significant under conditions of strong leadership, comprehensive continuous professional development and a positive, collaborative school climate. The main results related to the current study were that school leadership, under a decentralised system, plays a major role in any effective school. Also, autonomy in education has a positive impact, as argued by the current study.

A recent study by Caldwell (2016) reported four case studies in Australia that responded to the question: “How have schools with a relatively high degree of autonomy used their increased authority and responsibility to make decisions that have led, in explicit cause-and-effect fashion, to higher levels of student achievement”? The findings revealed that schools used their autonomy to select staff and allocate funding, each being capacities that gave greater autonomy. This argument is also compatible with the research described above regarding the central role of school leadership in education development. However, Caldwell’s study focussed more on the level of autonomy that should be considered when autonomy is discussed in an educational context. The common weakness of a large number of studies in terms of autonomy is that the actual extent of independence was never clarified, because

significant variation was found in school leaders' perspectives on their freedom and capacity to perform (Higham & Earley, 2013).

Baker, Campbell, and Ostroff (2016) conducted a study in the US that aimed to identify and assess factors contributing to effective autonomous school governance at the board of trustee's level. The respondents were 806 school heads and board chairs and six school leaders. The outcomes of the study reported that the ongoing training of trustees and plan identification are influencing strategic effectiveness and make a positive contribution to institutional performance. The study would have been more relevant if the researchers had expanded the arguments and explained the type of qualification before and after implementation.

In the Arabic context, a descriptive study in Qatar by Mashal (2008) was intended to identify the principals' and assistant principals' attitudes towards working in autonomous schools. The study considered a total of 46 male and female leaders and 87 male and female assistant leaders working in autonomous schools in the State of Qatar. The findings show that the male and female principals and assistant principals were willing to work in autonomous schools. Another important finding was that there is a significant possibility of applying the requirements of independent schools. Mashal's study recommended that the Higher Council for Education should pay attention to developing the school principals' administrative and technical efficiencies by giving them the opportunity to attend administrative training programmes that meet their academic and performance needs. The similarity between this study and the current study are: first, the characteristics of the study community are almost identical culturally and socially; second, the samples for each of the two studies targeted male and female school leaders, however, the current study, instead of questioning assistant leaders, questioned educational experts. The intention behind this choice is that the

researcher believes that school leaders and assistant leaders may have similar attitudes because they are in the same situation, while external experts may well have different perspectives.

Another descriptive study in Qatar (as the first country in the Gulf States to apply school autonomy, as mentioned earlier in this study) conducted by Salih and Alshar (2010) attempted to identify the real role of school autonomy in educational development. Hundreds of school principals and 400 teachers were surveyed about education goals, curricula, selecting and training teachers, teaching methods and facilities. The findings of the study showed that the role of autonomous schools is significant. However, the major limitation of the study is that the participants were all principals and teachers, while the questions were about the school performance and its role in educational development. The study would have been more useful if it had asked, for example, parents or students about the research issue. It is subjective to ask only the participants about the role of their performance with regard to a particular issue.

A study in the context of Jordan by Abu-Nair (2011) investigated the readiness for implementing autonomous schools from the educational experts' points of view in Jordan. The study sample was 18 education principles. A questionnaire of 20 items was formed. The study found that the readiness to implement autonomous schools is lacking. However, the key note in this study is that it did not determine the reasons for the lack of readiness.

A study in Saudi Arabia by Allheaniy (2012) investigated principals' attitudes toward their new administrative, technical, and financial authority. Participants of the study included 320 school principals from Makkah city. The outcomes revealed that principals' attitudes were positive towards the considerable administrative and technical authority granted, but that the

financial authority granted was generally insufficient. It concluded with the key suggestion that school principals need greater financial authority.

Another study in Saudi Arabia by Alhumaidhi (2013) was intended to identify the administrative and technical barriers that prevent school principals from employing the authority given to them. The study sample included 122 secondary school principals and 33 supervisors in Riyadh. The outcomes of the study demonstrated several important results. Generally, the principals point out that their authority was highly inflexible and that they were faced with a large number of administrative tasks but had insufficient administrative staff. Furthermore, the principals reported poor facilities and equipment, a general lack of funds and no financial incentives for principals. Finally, principals suggested increasing the financial resources available to schools, adding a financial allowance with which school principals could address school needs including modern school facilities and providing more technical equipment.

Two previous studies by Allheaniy (2012) and Alhumaidhi (2013), which are in the same context as the current study, found that principals seek more authority to make decisions. The aims of the current study are not only to examine the desire to have more authority, but also to discover to what extent these leaders can lead schools autonomously. Wanting more authority is not enough for successful leadership, which also requires that principals have the necessary capabilities and skills.

A study by Alotaibi (2013) investigated the degree to which principals exercised their new administrative and technical authority, and the role of this authority in improving the performance of school administration. The study sample included 110 secondary school principals from the city of Taif. The findings showed that the degree to which the principals

reported exercising their administrative authority ranged from very little to extensively, depending on the specific authority in question. The study also found that the authority to prepare emergency plans, and adopt programmes to solve school problems, were practiced to a moderate degree, while authority such as working with the private sector to sponsor school programmes and select assistant principals were infrequently exercised. It concluded that the new authority helps school principals to improve the operation and maintenance of school facilities.

A study conducted by Ellili-Cherif (2014) was intended to explore teachers' attitudes towards the shift to English as a medium of instruction in Qatari autonomous schools. It focussed on the advantages and disadvantages of this approach for both teachers and students, and the challenges they faced in the process of its implementation. Data for the study was collected by means of a questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The findings indicated that, while the approach has benefited teachers and their students, it is a challenging process. The study also reported important findings which were: the lack of associated planning, parents' resistance to this change, and a general lack of preparation amongst teachers for its implementation. Ellili-Cherif's study is consistent with the current study regarding the challenges of implementing school autonomy because the context of Qatar and Saudi Arabia have similar cultural and social structures. In the current study, the participants are asked about the challenges they most anticipated from their perspective. This argument will be expanded in the findings chapters.

In Saudi Arabia, Meemar (2014) conducted a study to examine Tatweer school principals' perceptions of the new administrative and technical authorities granted to them in the initial steps of decentralisation. A total of 173 Tatweer school principals completed the online survey developed for this study. The findings suggest that they noticed they have limited ability and

only low to moderate support in implementing their new authority. Participants were only in slight agreement that the authorities were likely to achieve the outcomes desired by the Saudi Ministry of Education.

A qualitative case study by Alyami (2016) examined the perceptions and experiences of Tatweer leaders and teachers to examine the extent to which they have been able to be innovative, and to examine the types of leadership and decision making that has been undertaken by such schools. Participants of the study included three Tatweer schools, Tatweer Unit members and one official of a Tatweer Project in Riyadh. The findings of this study identified the level of autonomy in managing the school: the Tatweer schools' systems are semi-autonomous when it comes to internal management, but they lack autonomy in terms of appointing staff, student assessment, and curriculum development.

Another related study is that by Al-Thaqafi (2014), which intended to identify the reality and the demands of the development of public school management in Saudi Arabia in the light of the school autonomy model. Participants were 1347 principals in Riyadh via a questionnaire. The findings revealed that the performance of public school management was weak. Also, there is a need for developing school management. The study recommended granting schools more authority and complete freedom to determine and manage school financial resources.

Considering all of the above studies, their aims, contexts, methods and key results will be discussed in order to provide a rationale for the current study.

First, with regards to the aims of the studies, Salih and Alshar (2010), Alotaibi (2013), Machin and Silva (2013), Bohlmark and Lindahl (2015), Ko et al. (2016) and Greany and Waterhouse (2016) aimed to explore the impact of autonomy in improving the performance of schools and educational outcomes. Abu-Nair (2011), Alhumaidhi (2013) and Baker et al. (2016) aimed to



investigate readiness, the influence factors and barriers to implementing autonomy in schools. Meemar (2014), Alyami (2016), Al-Thaqafi (2014) aimed to examine the authority granted, and the demands of the development of school management., whereas, Su et al. (2003), Diggory (2005), Mashal (2008), Allheaniy (2012) focussed on principals' attitudes towards their administrative duties. However, the current study aims to investigate the perceived impact of the current educational system on school principals' management roles and their readiness for greater autonomy as the country moves towards decentralisation.

Second, regarding the methods used, the majority of the studies used a survey to collect the data, such as Diggory (2005), Salih and Alshar (2010), Abu-Nair (2011), Machin and Silva (2013), Meemar (2014) and Al-Thaqafi (2014), while few of them such as Ellili-Cherif (2014) used a survey and interviews. The current study will use mixed methods and collect the data via a survey and interviews.

Third, in respect study contexts, the majority of them were in the Western context. Four of them were in Europe, Diggory (2005), Machin and Silva (2013), Bohlmark and Lindahl (2015) and Greany and Waterhouse (2016). Three in the US and Australia, Su et al. (2003), Caldwell (2016) and Baker et al. (2016). Only Ko et al. (2016) was in Hong Kong. Three of the studies in the Arabic context were in Qatar, Mashal (2008), Salih and Alshar (2010) and Ellili-Cherif (2014), because Qatar is the first Arabic country that applied school autonomy, while Abu-Nair' study (2011) was in Jordan. In terms of the Saudi context, there were six studies, Allheaniy (2012), Alhumaidhi (2013), Alotaibi (2013) and Al-Thaqafi (2014). Two of these focussed in *Tatweer* schools, Meemar (2014) and Alyami (2016). The reason for targeting the performance of *Tatweer* schools by researchers is that they are one of the initiatives of the Ministry of Education to develop education.

Finally, the result of these studies pointed out the impact of autonomy on job satisfaction (Su et al., 2003) and student attainment (Machin & Silva, 2013; Bohlmark & Lindahl, 2015; Caldwell, 2016). The results also showed the importance of granting more power to principals and in addition to their qualifications and training (Diggory, 2005; Mashal, 2008; Baker et al., 2016). In addition, the results indicated the key role of the decentralisation system and how principals and their professional teams contribute to school effectiveness (Greany & Waterhouse, 2016; Ko et al., 2016). In the context of Saudi Arabia, the result of the study suggested that a lack of autonomy in terms of appointing staff, student assessment, and curriculum development (Alyami, 2016) had a negative impact and highlighted the need to grant schools more authority and complete freedom to make their decisions (Allheaniy, 2012; Al-Thaqafi, 2014); in short, authority helps school principals (Alotaibi, 2013).

Thus, the gap that the current study is attempting to fill is that of the possibility of applying autonomy in schools including selection of staff and teachers, management of financial resources, development of school facilities and choosing the curricula. Reviewing previous studies is useful to clarify a number of issues. First, the above studies in the context of Saudi Arabia did not cover the current research issue. Most of them identify the lack of the authority principals have, but, to the best of my knowledge, there is no other study in the literature that has investigated the possibility of applying school autonomy. Alyami (2016) and Allheaniy (2012) have investigated whether principals wish to have more authority, but there is no study that examines how they perceive their ability to lead their schools independently. Also, this study investigates the requirements of a specific change, that of shifting to decentralisation through applying a school autonomy model, while Alhumaidhi (2013) and Mashal (2008) considered the requirements for developing school management in general. In addition, most of the previous studies in the Saudi context targeted Riyadh which, as the capital of Saudi

Arabia, has received more interest from the government in all sectors. The current study, in order to discover differences between cities that have contrasts in infrastructure, focusses on Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam and Sabia in the survey, with interviews conducted only in Riyadh and Sabia. The current study targeted Sabia, located in southern Saudi Arabia, because it has a lack of infrastructure and difficulties with regards to transportation, school buildings and internet services in many schools. For example, most buildings in Riyadh are built by the government to meet educational purposes, while many school buildings in Sabia are rented. In terms of methodology, all studies in the Saudi context used a questionnaire to collect the data, whereas the current study uses both a questionnaire and interviews.

## **4.4 Accountability**

### **4.4.1 Definitions**

The concept of accountability is complex from both a theoretical and practical viewpoint (Glatter, 2002; Simkins, 1997). It is also a multi-faceted concept which can have a number of interpretations (Burgess, 1992; Bush, 1994). Accountability is the 'relationship between an individual who dispenses a service and the recipients of that service' (Seyfarth, 1999, p. 103). Accountability is seen as answering to a higher power that has the authority to 'judge quality, exercise control and order compliance' (Earl, 1998, p. 187). However, in schools, principals are no longer only accountable to the officials in the Ministry of Education, but parents and communities also become effective parts in the process of accountability. Thus, Bush (1994) defined accountability as the condition of providing those with a right to know with an account of the performance of, or events that occur within, an organisation. Another definition by Arcia et al. (2011) defines accountability as "the acceptance or responsibility and being answerable of one's actions" (p. 2). By this definition, it would be possible to argue that

determining who might be accountable, without considering the nature of the institution's work and the type of services it provides, is inaccurate. Oliver (1991) defined accountability as being answerable, and giving explanations and justification for, any actions undertaken and addressing any mistakes as appropriate. An additional meaning is 'another name for whom to blame if things go wrong' (Tyack, 2003, p. 123).

The term 'accountability' is associated with responsibility, answerability, transparency and responsiveness (Oliver, 1991). Leithwood & Earl (2000) elaborated on this definition to claim that the term accountability entails "giving a report on; furnishing a justified analysis or explanation; providing a statement of explanation of one's conduct; offering a statement or exposition of reasons, causes, groups, or motives; or simply providing a statement of facts or events" (pp. 2-3). They show that accountability is giving reasons, explanations, causes, facts and justification, therefore it seems that the term links to the concept of responsibility. However, accountability involves more than 'giving an account': it includes evaluation because abstract information needs to be evaluated.

In the field of education, accountability can be defined as "the acceptance or responsibility and being answerable of one's actions. However, school management accountability may take other additional meanings: (1) the act of compliance with the rules and regulations of school governance; (2) reporting to those with oversight authority over the school and (3) linking rewards and sanctions to expected results" (Arcia, et al., 2011, p. 2). Student performance represents one of the measures by which to evaluate all other related factors. When the achievement of pupils is lower than expected, reasons and explanations should be given.

The phrase 'accountability' will be used in this study to refer to processes or mechanisms whereby the performance of tasks or functions carried out by an individual or institution are

subject to oversight or scrutiny by appropriate authorities and relevant stakeholders. Accountability has two elements: answerability and enforcement. Answerability refers to the obligation of the government, its agencies and public officials to provide information about their decisions and actions and to justify them to both to the public and to those institutions tasked with providing oversight. Enforcement, on the other hand, refers to the ability of the public, or an accountable institution, to impose sanctions on the offending party, individual or institution (UNESCO, 2018).

#### **4.4.2 Accountability in education**

The concept of accountability is a fundamental approach to strategic policies in a large number of sectors such as business, health and social services. However, applications of accountability differ from organisation to organisation according to their goals and visions. In other words, there are several degrees of accountability that can all nevertheless lead to logical results. Accountability in education includes compliance with statutes and regulations, adherence to professional standards and being accountable for student learning and accountability to the public (Anderson, 2005). The scope of accountability is to gather and spread information about school achievements and to allow monitoring of educational progress and teaching staff performance.

In the context of the current study, the decision makers may be concerned about the misuse of authority by school principals to meet personal interests. However, establishing a comprehensive system that includes criteria for choosing principals and launching an independent accountability approach will mostly avert this risk, and so clearly represents an excellent solution to this issue. In addition, values and morals should be part of the standards by which principals and teachers are chosen, particularly during such a transition process

(Fullan, 2001). In education, accountability is an important way of monitoring learning performance and teaching processes. Scott (1994) emphasises that control and accountability are fundamental to evaluating any improvement in education standards. Accountability exposes the weaknesses of operations and methods and specifies the sectors responsible for shortcomings and the hidden reasons beyond these. Thus, accountability helps decision makers to address problems and find solutions. Even though the processes of learning is complicated, accountability would lead to a more accurate analysis of outcomes and the discovery of suitable solutions. It is important to understand that accountability in and of itself may provide sufficient incentives for schools to improve performance. This could occur because of 'name-and-shame' mechanisms, or through specifically targeted interventions aimed at addressing problems identified by the gathering of information (Machin & Silva, 2013). In fact, accountability in education can be viewed positively from different perspectives and the following section will focus on three of these perspectives.

#### **4.4.2.1 Accountability in the Saudi Education System**

There are several bodies that are responsible for monitoring administrative and financial corruption in all educational institutions, including schools. The first is the Shura Council, which is one of the state authorities determined by the Basic Law of Government in 1924. It is based on the various aspects of Islamic legislation. The Council consists of a chairman and 150 members selected by the King from appropriate scholars, experts and specialists and is responsible for discussing the annual reports submitted by the ministries and other government agencies, including educational institutions, and to make appropriate proposals (Shura Council, 2017).

The second body is the Saudi General Auditing Bureau (GAB) which is the first independent audit institution, established in 1971, to report directly to the King, and for whom, in 1995, a royal order approved a new GAB organizational structure (Faqeeh, 2010). GAB aims to ensure financial control over all state revenues and expenses as well as monitoring the performance of government organisations, including educational institutions, to ensure that their resources are used efficiently, economically and effectively and to successfully achieve the objectives set out for them. In addition, GAB seeks to establish the principles of transparency, governance and accountability (General Auditing Bureau, 2018).

The third consists of the Bureau of Investigation and Prosecution (BIP) and the Control and Investigation Board (CIB), who are the two governmental units of the government with the authority to investigate reports of criminal activity, corruption, and “disciplinary cases” involving government employees, including those in educational institutions. These bodies are responsible for investigating potential cases and referring them to the administrative courts (Human Rights and Labour, 2014).

The fourth body was set up to increase the level of accountability within the country; in 2010, the king of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, issued an order to establish an Anti-Corruption Commission, “*Nazaha*”, to monitor and account for all the governmental sectors without exception, including educational institutions. The Commission is also responsible for monitoring administrative and financial corruption (Nazaha, 2018). Fredricks and Alsheha (2007) state:

*In most developing countries, the problem of accountability arises from the absence of monitoring agencies. It is not completely different in Saudi Arabia. As*

*you walk into any government agency you will notice the lack of professional work. In addition, the courtesy issue is spreading all over the place. That is why King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz ordered the establishment of the Control and Investigation Board to resolve these and other problems (p. 4).*

In addition to these organizations, there is an initiative that has been adopted by the Saudi government to facilitate procedures and increase accountability, namely e-government, that was established in 2003. The government of Saudi Arabia adopted e-government in order to confer its advantages to the national economy, promoting efficiency and tracking performance in public sector organizations, including educational institutions. The notion of accountability and performance measures began by enhancing e-government with commitments and continuous monitoring strategies. To ensure the accountability of e-government in Saudi Arabia, the new Office of Strategy Management (OSM) has been established (Zerban, 2015).

Moreover, one of the objectives of Vision 2030 is to adopt wide-ranging transparency and accountability and to measure the performance of government agencies and hold them accountable for any shortcomings, including educational institutions. These procedures are conducted through the Centre for Performance Management of Government Agencies to institutionalise these efforts in the long term and build performance dashboards to promote accountability and transparency (Vision 2030, 2017). However, these organisations do not monitor educational institutions and schools directly; in other words, these organisations are not responsible, for example, for the technical performance of teachers, curriculum content and students' results. However, when they receive reports or claims regarding administrative or financial corruption, they investigate the situation and take appropriate action.



The only external organisation that directly monitor the technical performance of the Saudi Ministry of Education, including schools, is the Training and Education Evaluation Commission which is an independent financial and administrative organisation established in 2015 that is linked directly to the Prime Minister. This is the authority in the Kingdom for the evaluation, measurement and approval of education and training to raise the quality, adequacy and contribution in the service of the national economy and development. The Commission is responsible for programmes and projects associated with general education through the evaluation of school performance and the standardization of curricula, the professional standards and teachers and the evaluation of the performance of the education system in the Kingdom. However, the Training and Education Evaluation Commission do not have the authority to change laws or regulations, and merely provide the Ministry of Education with recommendations (Training and Education Evaluation Commission, 2018).

In terms of internal accountability, the Ministry of Education monitors its staff in order to inspect and follow up on their work through the internal audit units (Ibn Saeed, 2011). In addition, it evaluates the performance of schools and teachers through the Educational Supervision Departments. The Educational Supervision System (as mentioned in Chapter 3 in the School Inspection System) includes departments in each district to help to ensure the effectiveness of school performance. Accountability procedures include monitoring the performance of schools through indicators such as teacher performance, school management performance and planning ability, school relationships with the local community and the school environment (Alkharaif, 2008).

However, the accountability of the Educational Supervision Departments currently faces several challenges. For example, supervisors complain about the lack of training, incentives

and authority to make decisions (Alkharaif, 2008; Alharthi, 2008). In addition, individuals such as supervisors, school principals and teachers do not necessarily realize the importance of accountability, and some believe that it is not currently being properly implemented (Almajal, 2009). As a result, accountability, whether external or internal, is a relatively new concept and still less than expected in relation to improving school performance. Thus, the current study seeks to investigate the reality of accountability and its importance in ensuring the successful implementation of school autonomy within the country.

#### **4.4.3 Rationale for Accountability - Theoretical Perspectives**

The rationale for accountability can be viewed as an important approach in education for many reasons. The first rational reason in the context of the current study is the association between autonomy (which is the key concept of the current study) and accountability. It seems that there is a strong link between accountability and autonomy because granting schools a greater authority with strict accountability will lead to better education, whereas increased autonomy without accountability may have a serious negative impact on the associated outcomes. The PISA 2009 report contends that:

*“Within countries where schools are held to account for their results through posting achievement data publicly, schools that enjoy greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to do better than those with less autonomy. However, in countries where there are no such accountability arrangements, the reverse is true” (OECD, 2010, p. 105).*

The above quotation demonstrates the connection between school autonomy and accountability and reflects their importance in education reform. Benton (2014) indicated this

association and emphasised that “The most effective education systems around the world are those that have high levels of autonomy along with clear and robust accountability” (p. 2). (DfE, Secondary School Accountability Consultation, 7th February 2013). Moreover, the World Bank (2016) contends that school autonomy and accountability are key components of an education system that ensure educational quality. The transfer of essential managerial responsibilities to schools promotes local accountability; helps reflect local priorities, needs, and values and offers teachers the opportunity to establish a personal commitment to students and their parents.

The second rational reason for accountability in schooling is to improve the performance and the quality of the educational process in order to gain better results. Roberts (1991) argues that the necessity for schools to be accountable is to allow for the desired improvement in quality. When schools are made accountable, they tend to perform better; a fundamental of accountability is to motivate an organisation to improve itself (Gillmore, 1997). Hanushek and Raymond (2004) argued that the development of student attainment is significantly improved with the introduction of new accountability measures compared to without them.

The third rational reason for accountability is that people who receive the service have the right to assess it. In school, learners should acquire knowledge, skills and the potential and attitudes which will enable them to meet the expected benefits to society (Shadreck & Hebert, 2013). Therefore, the school should be answerable to the community in terms of performing its duties as expected and to be held responsible for any failure to meet the community’s aspirations. In other words, “individuals are responsible for their actions, or inactions, and their effects on others” (Bivins, 2006. p. 35). Schools must be accountable to local stakeholders as well as national and local authorities because of managerial responsibilities at the school level (World Bank, 2016). Further, principals, as school leaders, are responsible for

running their schools and achieving the school goals and “opening themselves to public or external scrutiny for assessing their performance in relation to their goals” (Ebrahim, 2003. p. 815).

#### **4.4.4 Review of empirical research on accountability**

This section will review previous studies concerned with accountability, first in an international context and then in the Middle East region. Shin (2010) investigated the impact of states’ new accountability standards on changes in institutional performance in higher education in the US. His study analysed graduation grades for 467 higher education institutions and research productivity for 123 HEIs. This study raises some important issues in terms of accountability. It showed that there was no noticeable increase in institutional performance in universities that had adopted new state accountability measures. The study concluded that institutional performance was more related to internal, institutional characteristics than to external accountability measures. However, the study failed to explore the link between accountability and other key aspects such as autonomy and decision making since there are overlap and interrelated effect between these three concepts.

A case study by Kwok (2011) aimed to investigate how the principals of Lasallian schools in Hong Kong understood education quality and accountability, how their perceptions were shaped by the unique Lasallian context and their relationship to the different stakeholders to whom they were accountable. The study used semi-structured interviews with each of the ten principals, and was supported by documentary evidence to collect the data. The findings suggest that a common view of education quality demanded of all stakeholders would include: maintaining Lasallian values; enabling all students to achieve a level of academic attainment linked to their ability; achieving a shift from a teacher- to a student-centred approach,

including helping students to 'learn how to learn' and providing a diverse curriculum and holistic education.

Tranter (2011) conducted a study that investigated English secondary school principals' perception of the extent of their autonomy within accountability relationships in the UK. The study used both questionnaire and interviews to examine how principals have reconciled their autonomy with the accountability imposed on them by the School Improvement Partner (SIP) relationship. The study examined whether principals associated greater autonomy with increased accountability, and whether a partnership relationship was possible. The outcomes indicated that principals were more accountable and felt more accountable. However, there was no evidence from the study that they felt more autonomous or indeed linked greater autonomy with increased accountability.

In the Arabic context, a study in Egypt was conducted by Tawfeeq (2010) with the aim of preparing a proposal conceiving accountability policy in education which would help to achieve accreditation in pre-university educational institutions; to know the essential concepts of accountability and what the reality of accountability in education currently. The researcher used a descriptive approach. The outcomes of the study indicated the importance of establishing an external independent unit for educational accounting and building educational indicators for the evaluation of performance.

A descriptive study in Saudi Arabia by Aljaroudi (2010) explored the reality of educational accounting in Saudi universities. The participants were 37 heads of department, 55 lecturers and 50 students. It found that there is no policy in higher education that made lecturers accountable for their performance. It recommended that to achieve proper accountability, accountability should be part of the education system.

Damien (2011) conducted a study in Egypt to propose a model for applying educational accounting in pre-university education in Egypt. The study used a descriptive approach and collected data via questionnaire. The participants were 112 teachers. The study found that applying educational accounting helped to achieve quality in education.

Considering all of the these previous studies, the aims, contexts, methods and results will be discussed in order to provide a rationale for the current study.

First, in terms of the aims of the studies, Tawfeeq (2010) and Damien (2011) aimed to prepare a model of accountability. Shin (2010), Aljaroudi (2010) and Kwok (2011) aimed to explore the impact of accountability on performance. Tranter (2011) focussed on the relationship between autonomy and embedded accountability. However, the current study aims to investigate accountability with two other concepts (decision-making and autonomy) as components of shifting to decentralisation in schools.

Second, regarding the methods used, Tawfeeq (2010) and Damien (2011) used questionnaires, Kwok (2011) and Aljaroudi (2010) used interviews and Shin (2010) used document analysis. A similar study to the current study that used mixed methods, both questionnaire and interviews, is Tranter (2011). However, this was in a different context which will be explained in the next section.

Third, regarding study contexts, both Tranter (2011) and Shin (2010) were in a Western context, while Kwok (2011) was in Hong Kong, Tawfeeq (2010) and Damien (2011) were in Egypt, and only Aljaroudi (2010) was in the Saudi context. From another angle, Shin (2010) and Aljaroudi (2010) targeted higher education, whereas, Tranter (2011), Kwok (2011), Tawfeeq (2010) and Damien (2011) focussed on schools. However, there is no study to investigate schools in the Saudi context. Thus, this study will fill this gap of knowledge.

Finally, the results from these studies confirmed that:

- There is no agreement regarding the impact of accountability on performance, for example, Damien (2011) and Kwok (2011) found that accountability helped to achieve quality in education, and in contrast, Shin (2010) confirmed that there was no noticeable increase in performance when accountability was adopted. Thus, the current study will add more investigation to this key issue.
- There is no evidence that increasing accountability leads to more autonomy according to Tranter (2011). Therefore, this study will investigate autonomy and accountability together as factors in the decentralisation of education.

Although much has been written about accountability worldwide, accountability in schools in Saudi Arabia is a new issue because of the central education system. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap in this knowledge by investigating accountability as one of the components of shifting towards decentralisation.

Due to the dearth of research in an Arabic context, this chapter has drawn predominantly on empirical research undertaken in Western contexts. Implications arise, however, from applying Western-based theories to the Saudi Arabian context. First, key differences clearly exist between the Western and Arabic contexts, notably, and perhaps not surprisingly, in terms of their cultures and the political landscape. Another key difference is the education system. Saudi Arabia and countries such as the UK sit in different positions on the spectrum, vis-a-vis centralisation. Put simply, while Saudi Arabia operates a centralised education system, albeit in the embryonic stages of reform to relax central powers, the UK system is arguably already decentralised. Nevertheless, it is important to note “decentralisation in the field of education is multifaceted and complex, with different types of decentralisation co-

existing” (West, Allmendinger, Nikolai, & Barham, 2010, p. 1). These criticisms notwithstanding, Western studies do provide a theoretical and conceptual foundation for the present research. In addition, important insights can be gained from studies regarding decision making, autonomy and accountability intended to investigate the impact of the three concepts on educational outcomes and performance, such as Trimmer (2013), Bohlmark and Lindahl (2015), Machin and Silva (2013), Greany and Waterhouse (2016), Caldwell (2016) and Shin (2010). Further insights have been gained from research that investigated the extent of principals’ autonomy within accountability relationships, such as that by Tranter (2011), or assessed factors contributing to effective autonomous school governance, such as that by Baker et al. (2016). While these studies did not explore the influence of culture or politics on decision making, autonomy and accountability, they did provide a valuable foundation to research in the Arabic context in terms of both theory and practice.

## **Conceptual Framework**

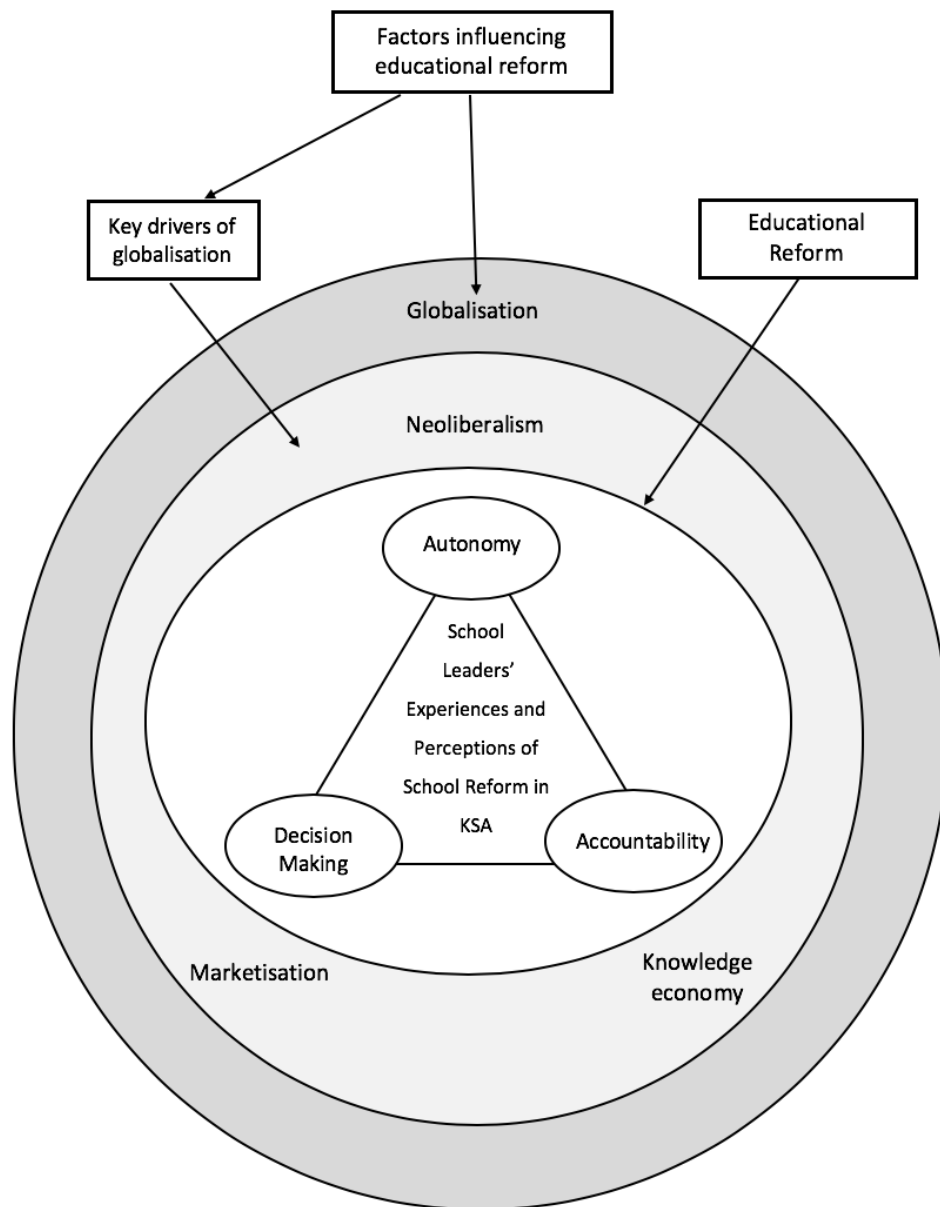
The diagram below (see Figure 4.1.) illustrates the key concepts that interlink in relation to education reform in KSA and highlights the study’s conceptual framework. The framework is based first on the concept of globalisation which affects education and is led by global organisations (Stromquist, 2002). The next level is based on the key drivers of globalisation, which are neoliberalism, the knowledge economy and marketisation. The relevance of neoliberalism is that its discourses and practices influence global government policies for education and training (Davies & Bansel, 2007). It is also the dominant ideology shaping our world today (Thorsen, 2010). The knowledge economy is strongly related to education reform in that countries need to produce highly educated knowledge workers who will be able to compete in the global marketplace (World Bank, 2003). The relation of marketisation (the attempt to put the provision of education on a market basis (Brown, 2015)) is its decisive role



in shaping a country's education and welfare system (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). These concepts are well-linked constructs in the literature on the global effects on education reform.

Under these global influences, educational reform is discussed in the sense of the general shift towards decentralisation which has been adopted in the current study to reform education in the KSA. This adoption emerged from the pressure of globalisation on certain governments to reduce their control over education and move to decentralisation (Shields, 2013). Three key concepts have been identified as central to providing new theoretical and analytical insights into school reform in KSA namely autonomy, decision making and accountability. As power is devolved to school levels, head teachers will have more autonomy in relation to decision making within their organisations, but with autonomy and local decision making comes accountability. Are headteachers prepared for such a shift? What opportunities and challenges do such a shift bring in relation to these three concepts? And what training and support might headteachers require in order to implement such changes? These are key issues that this study aims to address.

Figure 4.1: The study's conceptual framework



## **4.5 Summary**

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of the current educational system on school principals' management roles and their readiness for greater autonomy as the country moves towards decentralisation. This chapter has reviewed the literature in relation to this aim and provide a conceptual theoretical framework based on key concepts that frame this study. It is divided into three sections in which each section is devoted to one concept including definitions, relevant theories and a review of the previous studies relating to the concept in an educational context. It concluded by summarising the conceptual framework with a diagram, as per Figure 4.1.

## **Chapter 5: Methodology**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the methodology and research approach that was used to answer the research questions. The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of the current educational system on school principals' management roles and their readiness for greater autonomy as the country moves towards decentralisation. The following research questions emerged from the literature review:

RQ1: What are the main challenges currently facing school principals in the KSA?

RQ2: What are school principals' perceptions of their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making?

RQ3: What are school principals' perceptions of the opportunities that may arise with greater school autonomy in relation to decision making?

RQ4: What are school principals' perceptions of the challenges they may face when implementing school autonomy in relation to decision making and accountability?

RQ5: What additional support and professional development do school principals require for the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA in relation to decision making and accountability?

### **5.2 Paradigm Rationale**

In order to address these research questions, it was important for the researcher to clarify the philosophical viewpoint of the research and use that as a foundation to ensure rigour in their

inquiry. Each topic was considered from different perspectives because of the extensive links between philosophical theories and social research (Bryman, 2012). In order to form a deep understanding of the meaning and commitment to the research, it is important for researchers to rely on a philosophical background and to use that as a foundation to ensure accuracy in their investigation (Pring, 2010). Moreover, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe (2008) argue that neglecting philosophical issues in research can seriously affect the value of the research itself.

According to Creswell (2009), there are certain criteria for selecting a research design which are determined from, or by, the nature of the research problem, personal experiences and audience. Education and social science research are generally based on two different paradigms, the positivist and interpretivist, which justify the ideology behind the adoption of quantitative or qualitative methods (or both) in a particular piece of research (Grix, 2010). The researcher should focus on the participants' perceptions in the contexts in which these views are developed in order to understand, clarify and interpret social realities (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Grix, 2010). Thus, this study was designed in order to place the voice of the schools' principals at the heart of the study.

### **5.2.1 Ontology and Epistemology**

Reality is constantly in a state of flux through people's experiences of their own social worlds (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Reality, at any given time, is "the collection of all what is actual at this time, and this is contained in the present" (Aerts, 1996, p. 1). The question 'What is reality?' has been asked for thousands of years, in response to which various answers have been posited by philosophers:

*The question 'what?' is intimately connected with another deep and ancient question, namely 'why?'. Why do things in our universe behave in the particular ways that they do? But without knowing what these things are, it is hard to see why they should do one thing rather than another (Roger, 2004, p. 1028).*

It is important for the researcher to have “a clear and transparent knowledge of the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin research which is necessary in order: (1) to understand the interrelationship of the key components of research (including methodology and methods); (2) to avoid confusion when discussing theoretical debates and approaches to social phenomena; and (3) to be able to recognise others’, and defend our own, positions” (Grix, 2002, p. 176). Thus, the best place for students studying social science disciplines to start is, “with the terms ‘ontology’ and ‘epistemology’, as these are central to all social research” (Grix, 2002, p. 176).

Ontology is considered “the starting point of all research, after which one’s epistemological and methodological positions logically follow” (Grix, 2002, p. 177). Ontology is the world that surrounds people, and which is built upon collective meanings and shared, reasonable behaviour (David & Sutton, 2011). In practice, ontology is “the study of the essence of phenomena and the nature of their existence” (Gray, 2013, p. 402). Key questions about ontology are “what is there to know and what is the nature of the thing we are trying to know?” (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011, p. 11). In a more comprehensive suggestion, ontological claims can be considered to be “claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other. In short, ontological assumptions are concerned with what we believe constitutes social reality” (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8).

Ontology allows us to explore the perceptions of individuals regarding their interpretation of reality, because “social properties are the outcomes of the interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena” (Bryman, 2008, p. 366). From the above positions, researchers’ ontological perspectives are thus formed according to their particular view of the world and the ideas they want to study (Scotland, 2012). Key examples of ontological positions are “those contained within the perspectives of objectivism and constructivism” (Grix, 2002, p. 177). Therefore, the ontological position adopted within the present research is one of constructivism (see Table 5.1). The reason for choosing this position is the importance of school principals’ voices, opinions and perceptions, which were recognised through the constructionist position to be intimately involved in the construction of knowledge.

Epistemology is the attempt to understand what it means to ‘know’ (Gray, 2013). In other words, “if ontology is about what we may know, then epistemology is about how we come to know what we know” (Grix, 2002, p. 177). Epistemology “is concerned with the theory of knowledge, especially in regard to its methods, validation” (Grix, 2002, p. 177). It is also concerned with “the possible ways of gaining knowledge of social reality, whatever it is understood to be. In short, claims about how what is assumed to exist can be known” (Blaikie, 2000, p. 8). In addition, “epistemology is the philosophy of knowledge, a system of thought that articulates specific beliefs about the nature of knowledge, what it means to know, what is Knowable and the methods of the knowing” (Hartas, 2010, p. 16). Epistemology “provides a philosophical background for deciding what kinds of knowledge are legitimate and adequate” (Gray, 2013, p. 16).

It is been argued that “two contrasting epistemological positions are those contained within the perspectives of positivism and interpretivism” (Grix, 2002, p. 178). Thus, the

epistemological position adopted within this research is one of interpretivism (see Table 5.1) (which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter), which seemed appropriate to allow for the “in-depth analyses of human behaviour and perceptions” (Basit, 2010, p. 14). The reason for choosing this position is the importance of ‘school principals’ voices’ in furthering the understanding of the current educational system in relation to school management and the overall readiness for greater autonomy in Saudi Arabian schools. Another reason is that this study used the mixed method for data collection, involving the integration of both quantitative and qualitative data via survey and interview, which is the preferred approach for researchers adopting the interpretivist position (Bryman, 2012). Both the ontological and epistemological belief systems guiding the research practice serve as the philosophical basis to research practice (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), as knowledge is based on ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontology and epistemology are closely related but, “they need to be kept separate, for all research necessarily starts from a person’s view of the world, which itself is shaped by the experience one brings to the research process” (Grix, 2002, p. 179).

Another issue related to the researcher’s position is that ontological and epistemological beliefs may ultimately reflect the researcher’s deeply held values. Thus, the researcher may need to consider whether the research design is based on beliefs about playing to strengths and personal interest, or whether there is an additional layer of personal development which relates to exploring and learning new techniques (Vanson, 2014). Some researchers choose to explore the study issue depending on their own ontological positions and filter for preferences in their world according to their backgrounds (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000). This may lead us to a related issue, namely that of the extent to which is it truly possible for a researcher to remain fully detached from their research. Particularly, qualitative research faces the challenge of



maintaining the balance between involvement and detachment when it comes to participant observation (Takyi, 2015).

In terms of building knowledge, it is important for the researcher to understand two associated issues. First, 'Is knowledge constructed or discovered?'. If reality is constructed, then so too are the knowledge and meanings derived from social interactions in which individuals hold such in their minds; however, the epistemological notion of reality and meanings are not individual in nature, but instead are constantly negotiating meaning (Gergen, 1996). Constructivism is an "ontological position which asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 22). It can thus be suggested that, at least from this perspective, knowledge is a social reality that is negotiated rather than given (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003).

Second, it is essential for the researchers to understand whether there are different forms of knowledge. Philosophers have reflected on the nature of knowledge for centuries and researchers have long debated the role that different types and levels of theory play in gaining a better understanding of the world in which we live. Knowledge is created and spread through social interaction and can be categorized into two types: tacit and explicit. Tacit knowledge is gained through learning by doing and practice, and usually requires a learner to communicate with a teacher to enable knowledge transfer. In other words, tacit knowledge can be acquired by an individual from a direct relationship with others through imitation and practice, but without the necessity for the intervention of language (Del Giudice et al., 2011). Tacit knowledge "is not easily depicted in words, diagrams or other forms of communication, and may in fact not be verbalizable at all" (Del Giudice et al., 2011, p. 206). On the other hand, explicit knowledge is knowledge that can be identified, codified and isolated more easily. It

can be captured in a database and transferred between individuals without the need for direct interaction. Explicit knowledge is not scarce and is easily replicable, while tacit knowledge is scarce and difficult to appropriate. However, tacit knowledge can be more easily converted into explicit knowledge through the joint use of reasoning methods such as deduction, induction and abduction (Del Giudice et al., 2011).

The interrelationship between ontology, epistemology, methodology and methods appears through the researcher's methodological approach which is "underpinned by and reflecting specific ontological and epistemological assumptions, represents a choice of approach and research methods adopted in a given study" (Grix, 2002, p. 179). Researchers may experience some confusion over the two related terms of methodology and methods. However, methodology is specifically concerned with the logic, potentialities and limitations of research methods, whereas methods can be understood to be the techniques or procedures used to collate and analyse data (Grix, 2002). The present study used the mixed method (which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter) as it has been demonstrated, "how a mixed methods research approach was able to reveal much more than could have been gleaned through one approach alone" (Bryman, 2012, p. 648). However, as qualitative research methods, such as interviews, observation, and describing records, are amongst the most commonly used for the collection of data (Cohen et al., 2007), some of the advantages of using qualitative research approaches are described below.

First, qualitative research gathers data from the description of participants' feelings and experiences, and then interprets and analyses their actions (Denzin, 1989). This helps the researcher to determine the participants' personal experiences, and how culture has shaped their values (Corbin & Strauss, 2008); it also helps the researcher to understand social life from

the perspectives of the participants (Bryman, 2012). Second, qualitative research is useful for open-ended questions when the researcher needs to gather additional information (David & Sutton, 2011). Third, qualitative research results provide more comprehensive and deeper insight into the research issues (Walter & Gall, 1989). Fourth, from the advantages of using the interviews described in the current study, it was noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2018) that “using interviews, the researcher can reach areas of reality” (p. 1163). Indeed, semi-structured interviews offer opportunities for an open dialogue in which honest views are more likely to be expressed (Kvale, 1996). Moreover, although the researcher might use the same list of questions during each interview, questions can be added or modified when appropriate (Cohen et al., 2007).

On the other hand, there are certain limitations to qualitative research. First, the knowledge shaped from such studies is not easily generalisable to other people or other contexts due to their typically small sample sizes and the subjective nature of the associated research. However, generalizability is not a key aim of such research and indeed goes against some of the underlying assumptions of the approach.

Second, although all research is vulnerable to bias, including quantitative research, qualitative research might be more vulnerable of the two because the interpretation of data is based on preconceived ideas about the topic, the background, experiences, and the values of the researcher (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015). Third, qualitative research methods sometimes focus more on participants’ experiences and values rather than any other essential issues related to the context in question (Silverman, 2010). Another critique of qualitative research is that policy makers may consider it to lack credibility in terms of the results generated from the

qualitative approach, and stakeholders frequently use, and indeed rely on, quantitative research when research is needed (Sallee & Flood, 2012).

Finally, the process of qualitative research, including the analysis of the data, needs a considerable amount of time to complete, and it is sometimes not possible to allow the time required to conduct a proper study into a specific issue (Flick, 2006; Sallee & Flood, 2012). “Qualitative research is a long hard road, with elusive data on one side and stringent requirements for analysis on the other” (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 4). This is because data interpretation and analysis is typically quite complex (Richards & Richards, 1994). An issue related to the research process was discussed by Darlington and Scott (2003), namely that developing the initial question into a researchable form is a difficult task in qualitative research and may be an ongoing issue throughout the entirety of the research. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the research in relation to these key areas.

*Table 5.1: Research Overview*

Research design	Ontology	Epistemology	Methodology	Methods
Explanatory sequential mixed methods	Constructivism	Interpretivism	Quantitative and qualitative (mixed methods)	Survey and interviews

### **5.2.2 Positivism**

Positivism is a common approach that uses philosophical grounds to conduct social science research (Pring, 2010). The researcher’s function is as an independent observer of social reality since such reality is viewed through the lens of outside forces (Cohen et al., 2007). Positivists believe in a clear-cut relationship between things and events in the outside world

and people's knowledge of them (Staiton-Rogers, 2006). Also, positivists see no difference between social science research and natural science research; thus, researchers can use previous methods, ethos, analysis and interpretation (Bryman, 2012; Johnston, 2014). In addition, the researcher needed to link different topics in terms of cause and effect with the aim of generalising results (Cibangu, 2010; Johnston, 2014). Therefore, positivism seemed an inappropriate epistemological position for this study and therefore the interpretivist paradigm was considered more suitable.

### **5.2.3 Interpretivism**

The nature of the interpretivist paradigm is that "the social world can only be understood from the point of view of the individuals who are part of the continuing action being investigated" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 19). It is "characterised by a concern for the individual" (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 21). This means that Interpretivist research does not set out dependent or independent variables and does not prepare experimental procedures around set hypotheses, but rather aims to increase the understanding of the phenomenon in question and the effect of social context on the explanation of this phenomenon (Walsham, 1995). Therefore, participants' perspectives are supposed to be shared with the researcher so as to take into consideration any contexts (Grix, 2010). In addition, participants may generate more than one interpretation, all of which might be equally acceptable (Cohen, et al., 2000). Researchers who use the interpretive paradigm prefer to use a variety of data collection methods (Bryman, 2012). Therefore, the interpretive paradigm was a suitable approach (ibid) for this study, given that it used both a survey and interviews.

Interpretive researchers start with individuals and set out to understand their perspective about the world around them. Also, interpretive research exposes the close relationship

between the researcher and the situation that controls the process (Rowlands, 2005). Hence, interpretation is certainly informed by the experiences and background of the researcher (Creswell, 2009). In this study, the researcher had a similar experience to the participants which may have helped them to express their attitudes toward the issue under study. In addition, the researcher could lead the communication simply because of their common background. In order to show the importance of interaction between the researcher and the participants, it was considered worthwhile to discuss the constructionist approach.

The constructionist epistemology is when the researcher and the study populations dynamically cooperate to increase overall understanding through social actions, events and attitudes (Cohen et al., 2000). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) state that the researcher interprets events from an insider's point of view. Another side of the situation might be that "social constructivism emphasises the culture and the social context that surround people's life" (Hartas, 2010, p. 9). Hartas also discusses "a research epistemology that explores possibilities by giving voice to people who are directly affected by social and educational situations" and encouraging the use of integrated worldviews through a mixed-methods approach (2010, p. 15). Therefore, I recognised that participants in the current study were close to the research issue and that they represented a valuable source of data.

#### **5.2.4 Mixed Methods**

This research used an explanatory sequential mixed method design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), utilising both quantitative and qualitative approaches, with the whole study being framed within a social constructivist framework (Flick, 2006). This supports the concept that experiences are socially constructed and perceived differently by individuals depending on a range of cultural, historical and situational factors. This means the quantitative approach

played a supportive role in the qualitative in order to answer the research questions. Consequently, this study adopted both a mixed methods approach (Bryman, 2008) and embedded strategy (Cresswell, 2014) where quantitative methods were embedded within a qualitative design.

The study used a survey for male and female principals and then, after an initial analysis of the survey data, the interview questions for male principals were devised and piloted, which then formed the first phase of interviews. Thereafter, as based on an initial analysis of principals' answers, the questions for the educational experts' interviews (the second phase of interviews) were formulated.

There are various reasons for using an explanatory sequential mixed method, and some justifications for this choice are as follows. According to Sandelowski (2003), there are two main benefits to using a mixed methods approach: it allows one to gain a more complete understanding of the research phenomenon of interest, and it also helps to verify the data obtained by comparing the sets of findings against each other. Witkin and Altschuld (1995) argued that, "Using more than one data source or method and that you balance quantitative methods with qualitative ones", whereas, conducting a signal approach to collect data is "Generally insufficient to provide an adequate basis for understanding needs and making decisions on priorities" (p. 279). This illustrates the features of the explanatory sequential mixed methods, which were a strength in this study. The explanatory sequential mixed method is one in which the researcher first conducts quantitative research, analyses the findings and then builds on the results to explain them in more detail through qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Mixed methods include "combining or integration of qualitative and quantitative research and data in a research study. Qualitative data tends to be open-ended without predetermined responses while quantitative data usually includes closed-

ended responses such as found on questionnaires or psychological instruments” (Creswell, 2013. p. 77). The choice of research method is also, in all practicality, based on what might best achieve the stated research objectives (Creswell, 2009). As a result, employing an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach and embedded design was appropriate to meet the study’s aims and addresses the specific research questions highlighted earlier.

### ***The quantitative***

The survey was conducted to give advance warning about the expected phase and points of failure, where either study plans might not be followed, or methods and instruments were unsuitable or overly complex (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). In addition, the survey acted as an instrument with which the researcher could identify the opinions of the research sample at the earlier stage of the research, that is, when the researcher still needed to think about certain elements and factors which linked to the research problem or question. Thus, to increase the value of the study, a survey was conducted with school principals in order to create an initial picture of the study issue. In addition, the survey results helped the researcher to determine the most important issue to investigate in the following phase. Moreover, the survey results were used to ensure that the research questions would be fully covered, as well as to formulate clear interview questions.

### ***The qualitative***

Kvale (1996) noted that there are two main research methods, especially in social science research, which are qualitative and quantitative. In a most general sense, qualitative research relies on word data, while quantitative research relies on numerical data (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). It is possible to start with “quantitative data collection and analysis on a relatively unexplored topic, using the results to design a subsequent qualitative phase of the



study” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 47). A qualitative strategy, as a practical approach, has a number of advantages: flexible research design; clear study goals; data is collected in a personal context; suitable option for data analysis; answers the questions of how, what and why through processes and contents; and develops theories naturally from gathered information (Snape & Spencer, 2004). Although this research adopted both the quantitative and qualitative approach, the majority of data presented and discussed in the findings chapters was from the interviews, because the aim of conducting the survey, as mentioned earlier, was mostly to prepare for the main study, rather than using the data as part of the study results.

### ***Geographic locations***

This study focussed on a number of cities of Saudi Arabia, and which was accordingly divided into two stages: first, the survey focussed on four cities, which were Riyadh (the capital), Jeddah, Dammam and Sabya; second, the interview only focussed on only two cities, Riyadh and Sabya, which were chosen because Riyadh, Dammam and Jeddah are similar in terms of educational factors such as buildings, transportation to schools and Internet services, while Sabya is in a difficult geographic location that causes difficulties with transportation to school and in providing adequate Internet services.

More details about these cities, which are from four of the forty-five educational districts in Saudi Arabia (MoE, 2016), are as follows. The characteristics of these regions are similar in terms of their demographics and culture. However, Sabya differs geographically to the others; for example, Bani Malik, which is “located in the north east of Jazan in a very tough and high slope area and the topographic elevation is more than 645 meters, and the slope angle reaches up to 45°” (Lashin & Al-Arifi, 2012). Another example is Faifa, which is effectively at

the top of a high mountainous region in the south of Saudi Arabia (El-Mouzan, Al-Herbish, Al-Salloum, Qurachi, & Al-Omar, 2007). These examples, Bani Malik and Faifa, are a part of the Sabya educational district and are illustrative of the geographical difficulties which affect transportation to schools, the availability of land for building schools in convenient locations, and for inconsistent Internet services. Sabya has 588 schools and 588 principals in 278 male schools and 310 female schools (Department of Education in Sabya, 2016).

Turning now to the explanation for the relationship between the study context and people's knowledge and their impact on the results, Bolam (1999) argued that:

*Systems of school leader preparation, licensure/certification, selection, evaluation and professional development are necessarily rooted in the particular context of a single country. They are the product of a unique set of circumstances political, economic, social, cultural, historical, professional and technical – in that country and may usefully be conceptualised as complex organisational innovations. Accordingly, those attempting to promote international exchange and learning about such matters must take seriously what we know from research and experience about the adaptation and use of complex innovations across cultures (p. 41).*

Although some education issues and problems are commonly encountered worldwide, the context of the research should nevertheless be considered to obtain valuable and accurate findings.

Patton (2002) found that “different perspectives about such things as truth and the nature of reality constitute paradigms or worldviews based on alternative epistemologies and ontologies. People viewing qualitative findings through different paradigmatic lenses will

react differently” (p. 543). Hence, people’s knowledge is affected by cultural context, which may impact the perspective of the participant, and the outcomes of any research. The population considered in the research was that of school principals who, as might be expected, have the greatest collective experience through which rich information and valuable points of view about this issue were obtained. The participants provided personal opinions regarding granting schools more authority. They were thus expected to express their views within the cultural context in Saudi Arabia and its education system.

### **5.3 Participants**

Participants of the survey included both female and male school principals and covered the four cities in Saudi Arabia, as previously mentioned: Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam and Sabya. The survey received 146 participants, 94 of whom were male and 52 females. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 male school principals and 5 male educational experts. The interview focussed only on males because both the Saudi culture and education system, as mentioned earlier in the Saudi context, require gender segregation into male and female schools. The interview samples were formed of male principals who had spent at least five years as principals. In addition, biographical information was also collected such as their degree, subject specialism, age, years in service, and years in service as principals.

The sample size, criteria, sampling case and analysis objectives, planning structure, suitable resources and length of the interview can all affect the design of a qualitative sampling approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Individual traits are typically used as a fundamental factor in selecting the sample in order to measure the diversity of, and expand, the sample population (Cohen et al., 2007). The participants worked in all three stages of education: primary, secondary, and high school. However, as mentioned earlier, in many schools the

secondary and high school have a single principal; indeed, in some cases, a primary school and secondary school might also have the same principal.

This study attempted to discover the potential for success and the expected difficulties and barriers, in the case of applying school autonomy. Thus, the advantages of this study were gained through the experience of the participants, who will judge a situation in which they have lived for many years and are who are aware of in all its details. It was expected that during the interviews, hidden information would be revealed regarding the fundamental problems in education. The response to the survey would give the researcher a detailed conception of the study issue before the interviews with the school principals who chose to be involved were carried out. A small sample was chosen for the interview because it was anticipated that the target figure would provide sufficient data to answer the study questions. The following sections provide key background characteristics of the sample for each stage of the study.

The educational experts who participated in this study work as supervisors in the school management department in the Education Bureau. They were selected according to the criteria that they have more than 15 years' experience in education, and have also worked for at least five years as school principals and five years as supervisors.

The key reason for involving educational experts in this study was their key role and expertise in educational reform in terms of empowering schools, and in which they can assess the shifting process more comprehensively and provide a clear illustration of the possibility of moving to decentralisation and granting school principals greater autonomy. As per the selection criteria above, this expertise comes through their practice as former school principals and through their experience as supervisors. They were asked more focussed

questions on the initial results of school principals' motivations with regards to implementing school autonomy as well as investigating their perceptions about the implementation process. In addition, as mentioned in the Saudi inspection system (in the Saudi context in Chapter 3), these supervisors visit, and subsequently evaluate the performance of, the schools themselves, their principals and teachers, and make plans for school development. Moreover, when autonomy is implemented, supervisors will play an essential role in the associated shift, especially in relation to the evaluation of the performance of school principals when they are conferred greater authority. Thus, involving them in this study was perceived as important.

### **Participants in the Survey**

146 male and female school principals took part in the survey, 94 (64.38%) of whom were male while 52 (35.62%) were female. Table 5.1 provides further information about participants' highest qualifications, age, years of experience, and school type.

Table 5.2: Qualification, gender, age, experience and ST of principals (the survey).

		Number	Percent
The highest qualification	Bachelor	139	95.2%
	Masters	5	3.4%
	Doctorate	2	1.4%
Gender	Male	94	64.4%
	Female	52	35.6%
Age range	20-29	11	7.5%
	30-39	56	38.4%
	40-49	66	45.2%
	50-60	13	8.9%
years of experience	First year	5	3.4%
	2-4	14	9.6%
	5-9	28	19.2%
	10+	99	67.8%
School type	Primary school	56	38.4%
	Secondary school	12	8.2%
	High school	17	11.6%
	Secondary and high school	48	32.9%
	Supervisor	13	8.9%
	Total	146	100.0%

Table 5.2 shows the participants' graduation subject, which reveals that education management and leadership were not among these subjects. This means that principals' subjects were not related to their current jobs.

Table 5.3: Participants' teaching subjects (the survey)

Teaching subject	Number	percentage
Arabic	39	26.7%
English	7	4.8%
Geography	8	5.5%
History	11	7.5%
Islamic Studies	33	22.6%
IT	3	2.1%
Maths	14	9.6%
PE	4	2.7%
Science	25	17.1%
Sociology	2	1.4%
Total	146	100.0%

## Participants information-interview phase (1)

*Table 5.4: Overview of participants' information (school principals-the interview)*

Name	Years of Experience in Teaching	Years of Experience in Management	Qualification	Type of School Buildings	School Stage	City
Salim	7 Years	11 Years	Bachelor of Arabic	State	Primary	Riyadh
Salman	10 Years	5 Years	Bachelor of History	State	Secondary	Riyadh
Nasir	5 Years	16 Years	Bachelor of Biology	State	Secondary	Riyadh
Faisal	6 Years	6 Years	Bachelor of Science	State	Primary	Riyadh
Saad	3 Years	5 Years	Master of Education Management	State	Primary	Riyadh
Yosif	2 Years	14 Years	Bachelor of Science	State	High School	Sabya
Majed	9 Years	9 Years	Bachelor of Sociology	Rental	Secondary and High School	Sabya
Sami	12 Years	8 Years	Bachelor of Physics	Rental	Primary and Secondary	Sabya
Khalid	7 Years	5 Years	Bachelor of Physics	Rental	High School	Sabya
Salah	8 Years	6 Years	Bachelor of Biology	State	Primary and Secondary	Sabya

*Note (1): the interviews took place over two months in May and June 2016. Real names have not been used.*

## Participants information-interview phase (2)

*Table 5.5: Overview of participants' information (educational experts)*

Name	YoE in teaching	YoE in schools' management	YoE in supervision	Current job	Qualification	City
Umar	3	9	9 years	Supervisor	Bachelor of Maths	Riyadh
Yasir	2	8	10 years	Supervisor	Master of Education Management	Riyadh
Ali	5	7	8 years	Supervisor	Bachelor of Arabic	Sabya
Hassan	2	7	8 years	Supervisor	Master of English Teaching	Sabya
Hamad	4	12	9 years	Supervisor	Bachelor of Islamic study	Sabya

*Note (1): The interviews took place over two months in May and June 2016.*

*(2): Pseudonyms have been assigned.*

*(3): YoE: Years of experience.*

## **5.4 Data Collection**

Data collection approaches are the process of choosing among available alternatives for the collection of data and how to reach the reality of the phenomena (Schumacher & McMillan, 2006). The data collection in this study used a two-stage exploratory mixed methods approach (Cresswell, 2014). In stage one, the quantitative data was gathered from the survey, whilst in stage two, qualitative data was collected from the semi-structured interviews. These two methods are discussed in the following sections.

### **5.4.1 Quantitative Approach**

A survey is an efficient instrument through which to collect data quickly and easily; it is also flexible, which allows participants to answer the questionnaire anytime and anywhere. Data was collected via an online form from school principals using SurveyMonkey. School principals use the Internet as part of their work, thus they were thus expected to be able to access and answer the questionnaire in a reasonably straightforward manner. The survey included an invitation to participate in the interview and asked for their perspectives on applying school autonomy in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaire was sent to 300 principals through an appropriate online forum, with an anticipated response rate of about 50%.

Bhattacharjee (2012) showed that compared to other methods, the survey has several potential advantages. First, a questionnaire is a unique instrument with which to collect an extensive amount of unobservable information, such as attitudes, beliefs, and factual information. Second, it is also an ideal method with which to gather data from a large population which is difficult to observe directly. Third, the survey is the preferred tool for the collection of data from certain respondents due to its very nature, that is, due to the ability to respond at one's own convenience. Fourth, using surveys allows one to compare the analysis



of a large sample of the population, whether between groups or within groups. Fifth, conducting questionnaires is also economical because the sample is commonly contacted via the Internet because it economises on time, money and effort. For example, a survey can be conducted via a website or email using interactive forms in which respondents receive an email with a link that guides them to a website. However, there are many disadvantages to using an electronic survey, such as respondents' accessibility to the Internet. Bhattacharjee (2012) indicated that people who cannot access the Internet or do not have devices might result in a sampling bias, which is fundamental to measuring a social phenomenon. However, in this research, the potential participants were principals who work at schools, and all schools have Internet access (though this is, admittedly, somewhat lacking in a number of regions), and the majority of them could access the Internet via handheld devices. Thus, as mentioned earlier, they were not generally anticipated to have any difficulties in responding to the survey.

#### **5.4.2 Qualitative Approach**

The second approach to collecting data was that of conducting semi-structured interviews. The interview is the most common instrument used in qualitative research due to its flexibility, which makes it a particularly attractive approach (Bryman, 2012). In qualitative research, the type of interview conducted typically seems to be less structured. This is because questions in qualitative interviews are open and unrestricted, as compared with structured qualitative interviews. The participant reflects the researcher's concern which is not, in qualitative interviewing, to make the interview much more interesting (Ibid). Qualitative researchers need to find the balance between more structured and less structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Qualitative interviews require listening to what respondents say and how they think about the subject of the study.

To understand complicated issues, the researcher should let the interviewees explain their experience in their own words. Rubin and Rubin (2011) argued that the interviewer and interviewees may even seem to understand each other. For example, the terms they use might have more than one meaning that each may understand in a different way, especially when they are from different cultures. However, in this study, the participants and the researcher were in the same field and from the same culture, and common terms would thus be clear; nevertheless, anything that remained unclear would be explained and discussed. For example, if the participant started to speak about a different issue during the interview, the researcher explained the exact required question or terminology. Rubin and Rubin (2011) also argued the importance of the researcher being aware of their use of specific terms. The interviewer should not impose their own opinion on the interviewee because the interviewer should listen to, and keep communication open with, the participants. There are many advantages to carrying out interviews, which are: they are useful when people cannot be directly observed, respondents can provide historical information, and the researcher is able to control through the line of questioning (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, the main aim of the interviews with principals and educational experts was to answer questions about the possibility of shifting to decentralisation and the application of school autonomy through their experience via deep discussion.

After reviewing the survey with the supervisors, I asked five volunteer doctoral students and experts – two students at Reading University and three employees in the Saudi Education Ministry – to review the survey and interview questions to provide any feedback that they could offer. In light of this feedback, we discussed their suggested modifications and additions to the survey and interview schedule. They agreed that the survey and interview questions were valid, though a number of slight changes were recommended. Their feedback was taken

into consideration, and any associated changes were then discussed with my supervisors to gain their approval to start the pilot study.

In addition, after the initial analysis of the survey results, some changes were implemented to the interview questions to ensure that they covered all the questions of the study. The interview included clear and interactive questions, which were expected to help the interviewees to concentrate until the end of the interview. Closed and open questions were used, the latter to give the participants the chance to add their perspectives on school autonomy. Advance steps followed before conducting an interview. The researcher prepared forms and tools to begin the interviews. This preparation consisted of several elements such as a permission letter, identification, and contact details that were sent to interviewees should they wish or need to verify the above (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

The survey and interview were conducted in Arabic, which is the first language in Saudi Arabia. After discussing the survey and interview questions with my supervisors, a specialist translated the instruments from English to Arabic to ensure process quality. They were then ready for the pilot process and subsequently for use in collecting data.

### **Piloting Process**

A pilot study was conducted, primarily to identify any problems related to the design of the study instruments. Using a pilot study is important to verify the veracity of fixed-choice answers, and the adequacy and comprehensibility of instructions and questions (Bryman, 2008).

I conducted the piloting process in several phases. After getting the survey peer reviewed, I asked ten volunteer principals to answer the survey in order to pre-test it and avoid any

potential practical problems, and also to ensure the effectiveness of these instruments in terms of both their content and coherency. After obtaining responses from these respondents, the pilot study showed the appropriateness of the questions and the types of responses expected; however, the participants recommended slight changes in format to certain questions. The survey was then amended to its final version and its suitability and content were then verified with the same group (see Appendices 7, 8 and 9).

Before conducting the interviews with school principals, I used the first two interviews to pilot the questions and consequently did not use them in the data analysis. The first two interviews helped me to evaluate the questions, so I made some slight changes to the questions and prepared the final interview version. Therefore, although there were a total of 12 interviews with school principals, I only used 10 of them in the main analysis for the reasons given above. I also planned to use the first educational expert interview as a pilot; however, I subsequently considered this interview to be appropriate for use, and it went very smoothly. This assured me that there was no need to make any changes to the remainder of the interviews. Thus, I used the first interview in my data and conducted four further interviews with educational experts.

## **5.5 Data Analysis**

The purpose of the study determines the method of analysis, whether using qualitative or quantitative data or both. Furthermore, the study could be conducted using an inductive or deductive approach (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Burns and Grove (2005) argued that a deductive approach moves from the general to the specific and is based on an earlier theory or model. Conducting a study using mixed methods requires the analysis of the data via two techniques, both thematic and statistical, within the same body of research. Guest, MacQueen & Namey

(2012) indicated that “thematic analyses focus[ses] on identification and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes. Codes are then typically developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis” (p. 10). Thus, the initial matrix may allow the initial organisation of what might well be a huge amount of qualitative data. Data collection from qualitative research is a process that requires the researcher to explain and make sense of a variety of information. This is the descriptive phase, and includes the interpretation of the data collected. Data can be collected via different instruments such as surveys and interviews.

This study first conducted a survey, which demanded the use of statistical and thematic analysis because the survey had both closed and opened questions. There were some forms included in the survey that allowed participants to add their own comments and which would subsequently require thematic analysis. Therefore, the quantitative data of the survey was analysed statistically via SPSS and by using descriptive techniques to produce frequencies and percentages in order to allow for quantitative analysis results, while the qualitative data from the open questions was analysed thematically via MAXQDA (please see Appendix 12 for the initial coding of the survey’s open questions).

In the second phase, the thematic approach was used to analyse the data collected via the interviews. According to Boyatzis (1998), thematic analysis is “a process for encoding qualitative information when a theme is a pattern found in the information that at a minimum describes and organises the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (p. 4). Regarding the interviews and the data from the open questions in the survey, the responses were translated from Arabic to English (please see Appendix 10 for an example of translating from Arabic to English). Describing all the aspects of the text took place under convenient headings (Burnard, 1991, 1996; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The data was then

classified, divided, and coded into categories according to the main themes (please see Appendix 11 for the initial coding of the interviews).

## **5.6 Quality Criteria**

Ensuring research quality is “critical to both research traditions. However, the criteria for judging a qualitative study differs from quantitative research” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 22). As mentioned earlier, this study used mixed methods to collect data via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, thus the quality criteria applied to this research will be considered and discussed for both quantitative and qualitative data.

Traditionally, quantitative research approaches have used terms such as reliability and validity when discussing quality in the research process. Joppe (2000) defined reliability as “The extent to which results are consistent over time and an accurate representation of the total population under study is referred to as reliability and if the results of a study can be reproduced under a similar methodology, then the research instrument is considered to be reliable” (p. 1). According to Bell (1999), reliability is the extent to which a procedure would give similar findings under constant processes in all situations. In other words, using an instrument in a similar context with a similar group of participants would find similar results, and this must be demonstrated to measure reliability (Cohen et al., 2000).

The piloting of the questionnaire covered factors such as the content, the extent to which the study goals were achieved, the relationship between the content of the instrument and research questions, suitability, coverage of the research area, and the clarity of the language used. As Pallant (2001) asserted, verifying a questionnaire’s reliability is an evaluation of the internal consistency of items, that is, “the degree to which the items that make up the scale are all measuring the same underlying attribute” (p. 6). All these aspects were considered

during the piloting and modifying processes. As a result, these steps helped to ensure that participants were able to understand the questionnaire without ambiguity or uncertainty.

In the present study, all issues related to validity and reliability were considered in the surveys as follows: first, the English version of the survey was reviewed by supervisors and the comments considered. Second, a pilot was conducted with a group of impartial researchers, educators and a number of doctoral students to verify the validity of both the questionnaire and the interview questions in the Arabic version. Finally, the comments were modified in accordance with the above feedback, which was then used to produce the final version.

With regards to qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) contended that the criteria of reliability and validity are essential to establish the trustworthiness of qualitative research. However, "terms like credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 57). Therefore, introducing a different terminology will avoid the major criticisms of qualitative inquiry and "replace reliability and validity with new terminology particular to the qualitative inquiry" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 1380), such as credibility, transferability and transparency (Bryman, 2012).

Quality criteria rely mostly on the research paradigm, such as the constructivist and positivist paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This means that "attempts to apply {quantitative} criteria to qualitative research would inevitably result in confusion and inconsistency because criteria are incompatible with the basic philosophical assumptions of this type of enquiry" (Hammersley, 2007, p. 288). In addition, Wheeldon and Ahlberg (2012) argue that it is essential to identify that "the quality of mixed-methods research is based on the integrity of the process used to integrate or combine different methods within one project" (p. 126). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that trustworthiness is forced to accept the results but never

to be absolute proof. Bryman (2012) contends that trustworthiness can be seen as equivalent to validity, employing criteria such as credibility, transferability and transparency, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Credibility refers to the degree to which the research represents the actual meanings of the research participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility, which corresponds to internal validity, can be defined as an evaluation technique used to ensure that the data drawn from the participants is represented credibly in the research findings (ibid). It relates to the requirement that the findings are believable from the perspective of research participants (Seale, 2012). In other words, credibility relates to all aspects of the research design, including the aim of the research, participant selection, data collection, the context, and how all of these accurately answer the research questions (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). It can be seen that “the credibility of research findings that are used to make policy recommendations is particularly important for ecosystem management; assessing the extent to which the reader believes the recommendations are credible has implications for the expected success of implementation” (Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams, & Blackman, 2016, p. 2). This means that readers can determine for themselves the credibility of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Qualitative researchers “looks for the involvement of their participants in data collection and seeks to build rapport and credibility with the individuals in the study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 20). In order to achieve this, in the current study I checked my interpretation of what was discussed in the interviews by summarizing what had been said and asking if my understanding matched that of the participants and by offering opportunities for them to review their answers. After completing the interviews, I translated one of the interviews from



Arabic to English, then sent both versions to a professional translator to ensure that my translation corresponded to the original vision (please see Appendix 11 for an example of translating an interview from Arabic to English). He did not find any key issues in my translation, which allowed me to complete the remaining translations with much greater confidence. In addition, it was possible to check consistency by comparing the data collected from the interviews (Denscombe, 2010).

A researcher can increase the transparency of their research by providing sufficient detail to demonstrate the trustworthiness and accuracy of their data collection and analysis methods, (Moon et al., 2016). Transparency requires that the researcher provide the research community with the motive for conducting the research, offering a clear explanation of the data collection methods, sampling process, and data analysis (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). In the current study, I provided participants with all the information needed and explained the data collection procedures clearly and fully. I also included a clear motivation for the research in Chapter one, and highlighted all key steps in the data collection and analysis process in this chapter.

In qualitative research, “transferability refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be transferred to other contexts with other respondents, it is the interpretive equivalent of generalizability” (Anney, 2014, p. 277). In the current study, transferability was accomplished through explanations of the research context and any significant assumptions to the research process. It is hoped that this will allow other researchers to assess the relevance of the findings in their own contexts (Denscombe, 2010).

## 5.7 Ethical Issues

There are steps that must be taken in advance to the beginning of the process stages of any research, one of the most important of which is ethical considerations. Ethical issues are a fundamental phase in social and humanitarian research. Pring (2000) indicated that research ethics are of vital importance and help the researcher with guidelines as to the way in which a study should be conducted in a morally acceptable way. In addition, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines for ethical consideration include a number of rules, which are: participants must be informed, and their consent must be signed; participants must be informed with openness and disclosure; participants must have the right to withdraw at any time; privacy of participants must be protected, including confidentiality and anonymity; and harm to participants must be avoided (BERA, 2011).

Thus, before beginning any practical stages, this study followed up the necessary and approved procedures required by the University of Reading to address all related issues. First, a risk assessment procedure was carried out by the researcher which confirmed that the research would not result in any risk to the participants (please see Appendix 2 for the risk assessment).

Second, the two instruments, survey and interview, included information sheets which provided the participants with a clear picture and an extensive explanation about the study and its goals, expected steps, and the framework of participation. Also, the information sheets mentioned that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time (please see Appendix 3 for principals' information sheet). All research procedures had been approved by the supervisor and ethical approval had been gained from

the Institute of Education, the University of Reading (Please see Appendix 1 for the ethical approval).

The research sample targeted school principals and educational experts who had considerable experience in their fields, and who had the right and the ability to make informed decisions about their participation in the research. In addition, the researcher has extensive experience with the study population and their culture. These reasons might well be expected to facilitate ethical research procedures. Obtaining permission to conduct the study and access schools was arranged by the supervisor who wrote an official request to the relevant department in the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia (please see Appendix 5 for permission statements to collect the data).

Naturally, a full explanation of the interview was given at the beginning of each session. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw any time during the session without reason. Furthermore, they were notified that all information, their identity, and the confidentiality of any information offered would be protected for the purposes of the research. Ethical considerations required completing the access process, gaining informed approval from participants, protecting identities and confidentiality, and offering the right to withdraw at any time and at any phase (Cohen et al., 2000; Christians, 2000; Pring, 2000), (please see Appendix 4 for the participant consent form).

## **5.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the philosophical and design process of the research. It outlined the justifications for adopting the mixed method approach. The data collection methods have been justified, and the sample choice criteria and the approach to data analysis have been clarified. The fieldwork was undertaken in four cities in Saudi Arabia. The data was collected

in two stages: a survey involving school principals, and interviews with both school principals and educational experts. In addition, particular care was given to the ethical issues involved. Moreover, the necessary proof of reliability, validity, credibility, transparency and transferability were presented.

## **Chapter 6: Data analysis and discussion (1)**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of the current educational system on school principals' management roles and their readiness for greater autonomy in Saudi Arabia from three main perspectives: decision-making, autonomy and accountability. Five research questions guided the study, namely:

RQ1: What are the main challenges currently facing school principals in the KSA?

RQ2: What are school principals' perceptions of their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making?

RQ3: What are school principals' perceptions of the opportunities that may arise with greater school autonomy in relation to decision making?

RQ4: What are school principals' perceptions of the challenges they may face when implementing school autonomy in relation to decision making and accountability?

RQ5: What additional support and professional development do school principals require for the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA in relation to decision making and accountability?

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the research involved three stages of data collection, beginning with a survey administered to 146 male and female school principals. The survey consisted of four parts: 1) personal details including gender, age, years of experience as principals, teaching subject and highest qualification; 2) school principals' perceptions of their

capability to manage their schools autonomously; 3) school principals' perceptions of the impact of school autonomy on education management and outcomes for pupils; 4) the challenges that may be faced with the implementation of school autonomy.

I used a 5-point Likert scale to design the survey, however, after analysing the data, I found that the values of Strongly Agree, Strongly Disagree, Undecided generally constituted less than 5 responses, whether 2, 1 or zero in most the data. After that, I converted the data from 5-point to 2-point. With regard to these two types, a comparison was made by Alwin and Krosnick (1991), who found that the 2-point scale had better quality than the 5-point scale (Revilla, Saris, & Krosnick, 2014). I combined Strongly Agree and Agree and to become Agree. I also combined Strongly Disagree and Disagree to become Disagree. Because the Undecided point clearly cannot be combined with Agree and Disagree, I divided the value of Undecided to constitute 50% Agree and 50% Disagree.

All the quantitative data in the survey were analysed using SPSS. Responses to open questions were coded via MAXQDA, then frequencies were generated for the number of instances a theme occurred in the data, and the number of respondents citing each theme. Responses from the open survey questions answer RQ1. The data from the closed questions in the survey were analysed using descriptive techniques to produce frequencies and percentages in order to answer RQ2, RQ3 and RQ5. Informed by the results of the survey, the two qualitative stages of the study sought to answer all five research questions. Interviews with male school principals answered all research questions and focussed on four themes: 1) the principals' perceptions of their own abilities to manage their schools autonomously; 2) their perceptions of the impact of school autonomy on improving education outcomes; 3) their perceptions of the barriers and difficulties that may be faced through the implementation of school autonomy; and 4) their views of any support and development that would help them with the

implementation of school autonomy. These themes were explored further with education experts in the third and final stage of the study. The data were analysed using thematic analysis techniques.

The findings that follow are presented in four chapters: Chapter six answers RQ1, Chapter seven answers RQ2 and RQ3, Chapter eight answers RQ4 and Chapter nine answers RQ5.

## **6.2 RQ1: What are the main challenges currently facing school principals in the KSA?**

### **6.2.1 Introduction**

A number of open questions were included in the survey to provide an opportunity for participants to share any additional information that they viewed as relevant to the study. Of the 146 male and female principals surveyed, 68 provided answers to the open questions. Several themes emerged in the data that were related to the challenges of school management due to the current centralised education system. These themes were then explored further in interviews with school principals and education experts.

### **6.2.2 Excessive tasks and lack of authority**

A key theme amongst 26 (38%) surveyed participants and a common view expressed by all interviewees both principals and educational experts were that school principals have plenty of tasks to do but insufficient authority with which to do them efficiently. Respondents explicitly point out that they need greater authority to effectively manage their schools and, related to this, greater autonomy to delegate duties not nominally within the remit of their roles. For example, this participant explained:

*...I have a large number of tasks that are not related to my job as a leader. I do the work of assistant staff. I am also responsible for poor teachers' performances, and the preparation of the facilities. I feel that I am an executive rather than a leader because I don't have authority... (survey open questions).*



Similarly, another participant felt that there were a number of irrelevant tasks that school leaders were asked to achieve despite there being insufficient school staff and teachers, but without authority:

*...plenty of requests from the Education Bureau and supervisors that the school principal is responsible for such things as the absence of teachers is a great challenge. Because I don't have authority [...] and I cannot address these issues in the presence of a lack of authority... (survey open questions).*

Another respondent talked about the position of the school principal:

*... The school principal is the weakest part of education, with many duties and without sufficient authority and support. We need a major change in the duties and authority of the principal... (survey open questions).*

Responses from the qualitative (semi-structured) interviews provided further insight into the challenges facing principals. All ten principals interviewed said that the authority given to them and tasks entrusted to them are unbalanced. This opinion is apparent in the response given by Majed, a head teacher with nine years of experience of teaching and nine years of experience as a principal:

*... in fact, nowadays the school principal is responsible for everything within the school, even student life. The person most held accountable with the least authority is the leader of the school, while high-level officials in education have more authority with fewer duties... (Majed -semi-structured interviews-1).*

Similarly, another respondent reported their difficulties in terms of the lack of authority. Salim, a principal of a primary school with seven years of experience of teaching and 11 years of experience as a principal, responded:

*...we face some difficulties that cannot be solved because we do not have authority. For example, if I have a teacher who is absent for some days, this affects the progress of the curriculum. However, as a principal, how can I solve this problem without authority? But if I had more authority, the solution could be found quickly... (Salim-semi-structured interviews-1).*

Participants provided further details and specific expressions regarding this matter such as “principal handcuffed, lack of empowerment, lack of affecting authority, the limit of decision-making, just an implementer of instructions and do not have the right to change, not giving freedom in decision making”. These expressions all clearly reflect dissatisfaction with the authority granted to school principals. Furthermore, this point is of particular importance as the responses reflect the extent of the problem and its impact on principals’ feelings toward their jobs. They felt that they were merely ‘machines’, implementing orders from higher levels in educational institutions.

These results revealed that most principals report a lack of authority to make decisions as being one of the key challenges that made their duties difficult to achieve. Moreover, it has a significant negative impact on the performance of teachers because they know that principals cannot act to address teachers’ ‘poor performance’.

These findings are consistent with that of Alhumaidhi (2013), who contends that principals’ authority was highly inflexible that they were faced with a large number of administrative tasks but had insufficient administrative staff. The ambiguity in the authority and

responsibilities in state schools under the central system seems to be a problem for school principals in particular and the performance of the schools generally. Khalil and Karim (2016) state that “even though in theory the ministry of education delegated some freedom and autonomy for principals to act as instructional leaders, the policies in practice did not dictate principals’ specific responsibilities” (p. 511). However, the same issue may also arise in autonomous schools unless the system is changed in order to tackle such issues. For example, Suggett’s (2015) analysis of the most recent developments in school autonomy initiatives suggests that systems have a responsibility to clarify the freedoms granted to schools as well as defining the principals’ responsibilities and capabilities. The suggestion here is that just granting authority to individual headteachers is not sufficient – school systems also need to change. This point will be developed later in this thesis.

In addition, Alsayqh (1989) and Alzaidi (2008) suggested that granting principals more power would be worthwhile because the most common factor that leads to dissatisfaction is the lack of authority to undertake responsibilities. The parity between responsibility and authority is important as authority is a way to bear responsibility (Alshihri, 2005). If principals are expected to be responsible for certain duties, it would seem reasonable they must be granted the power with which to affect or perform them.

In addition, these results are linked to a recent PISA report (2013) that provided direct evidence in support of the claim that allowing principals higher levels of autonomy can improve school quality as well as teacher satisfaction (Mizrav, 2014). School leadership is a position that requires a person who has ambition, derives considerable job satisfaction, and has a positive and enthusiastic outlook through which they can act as an inspiration for both other teachers and students. According to an Ofsted report in the UK (2014) “The vision and ambition of the headteacher, combined with the unrelenting commitment of other leaders

and teachers, are crucial elements of the academy's success" (p. 1). Otherwise, they may negatively affect the people around them and become a negative influence on performance and a source of general frustration (Mulford, 2003).

What was clear from these results, was that decentralisation and the application of school autonomy can be seen: as a suitable approach to enacting (1) reforms to the management and government system (Reddy, 1996); and the transfer of powers of decision making from higher levels in the official hierarchy to lower levels (Bray, 1985); and increased the efficiency and the freedom of school from the bureaucracy of the centralised system (Lai-ngok, 2004).

Furthermore, such a move may positively affect school performance and students' results, because policies increasing school autonomy may contribute to improving service delivery, which is a common issue in many parts of the world (Winkler & Yeo, 2007).

The present results are significant in three major respects. First, these findings give a clear message as to the need for educational reform, as well as the importance of reconsidering the role of school leaders. Their role can be seen through hard work, initiative and self-improvement as individuals, and by giving them a chance to make their own choices and decisions – all key aspects of being a senior professional (Gill & Scharff, 2011).

Second is decision making, and the consideration of how important it is to involve the school management in this process. As mentioned in the literature review, the school principal has more information and knowledge about their school than any official in the Ministry of Education (Patrinos & Fasih, 2009), yet is not considered to be a part of the decision-making process in the centralised system. This is in contrast to the theory of School-Based Management (SBM), which is related to decentralised and local decision-making in schools, and which considers that parents, community members, school staff, and students generally

have more information about the school and thus should be a part of the decision-making process (Patrinos & Fasih, 2009). Third, the management of modern organisations is based on information as an essential resource for decision making because of the relationship between information systems, system analysis and decision making (Ada & Ghaffarzadeh, 2015) and this needs to happen at the local level in order to be as effective as possible.

### **6.2.3 Staff and teachers' shortages**

The data suggest that shortages of administrators and teachers are a significant barrier to good school performance. The results revealed that a shortage of teachers is a key issue that principals are not able to address. Schools in Saudi Arabia suffer from poor distribution of teachers around the country because some schools do not have sufficient administrators or teachers, while in other schools there are more than needed. These findings are discussed in more detail below.

While the issue of school staffing is affected by a number of factors such as the school location and services available to the school, the Ministry of Education is responsible for addressing staff levels. Therefore, under the current centralised education system, principals do not have any authority to make recruitment decisions. This is clearly a source of great frustration. A third of the surveyed participants who answered the open questions and all interviewees, both principals and educational experts, reported that shortages of teachers and staff is one of the greatest challenges facing school principals and making school management difficult. Reflecting the thoughts of many other survey respondents, this interviewee wrote:

*... Since I have been a principal, we begin the school year with a shortage of teachers in some subjects, especially English and maths, as well as a shortage of*

*administrative staff. This causes me, as a school principal, considerable frustration... (survey open questions)*

Another respondent surveyed gave an explicit example of how staff shortages impact on student attainment:

*...in one year, the mathematics teacher did not arrive until two months after the beginning of the year. I could not find a teacher who could teach maths because the curriculum in secondary school needs a specialist and cannot be taught by other teachers. This affects the results of the students in the final exam and the rank of the school... (survey open questions).*

The interviews held with the principals provided further insight into the shortage of teachers and administration staff. Yosif, a head teacher with two years of experience of teaching and 14 years of experience as a principal, said:

*...there are schools that have an excess of teachers and staff, while there are schools that have a shortage. The problem is the distribution by the Ministry of Education and the educational provinces ... (Yosif - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The principals also felt that this problem distracted them from their main duties.

*...I say sometimes, maybe there is no solution to the issue of the shortage in the number of teachers because it happens every year. This distracts me from developing and improving the school performance. I am busy trying to find a solution to this problem. Yet, the decision is not in my hands ... (Faisal-semi-structured interviews-1).*

And another head teacher said:

*... it is the biggest challenge I have faced. I may find a solution to the shortage of administrators or other staff, but not the teachers. I am wondering why the officials repeatedly make the same mistake. What does the Ministry of Education want the school principal to do, how to manage student time? ... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Principals also pointed out that the solution to the problem of teacher shortages has been an issue for some time:

*... the shortage of teachers is an old problem in schools, and it still exists. This issue affects the fundamental component of the educational process, which is the students.... (Salah- semi-structured interviews-2).*

This finding broadly supports the UNESCO's 2010 Global Monitoring Report that raised increasing concerns that the shortage of teaching professionals worldwide will prevent the attainment of Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 2015 (Demirjian, 2015). These results are in line with those of Alrushdan (2005), who argued that central decision making was resulting in a lack of teachers in certain locations because of the strict bureaucratic procedures that were delaying the decision-making process at a local level.

The clear implications of these results are that teacher shortages have a negative impact on primary school children accessing a full education, which may push the government to lower their academic standards when recruiting teachers in order to fill the gaps that result from teacher turnover and retirement (Demirjian, 2015). Moreover, the number of teachers retiring in Saudi Arabia has increased over the last two years (MoE, 2017), which further

contributes to this problem. It is possible, therefore, that giving the school management the authority to select teachers will help to provide schools with their staff and teacher requirements more quickly at the local level because, as mentioned earlier through the data, the main reason for these problems is the perceived poor national distribution of teachers by the Ministry of Education.

#### **6.2.4 Feeling Neglected**

Of the almost one-third of surveyed participants who answered the open questions, eight of the principals and four of educational experts reported that school principals feel neglected by officials and decision makers in the Ministry of Education and by the Departments of Education in their provinces, in particular regarding their involvement in decision making. A comment by one participant highlighted how important it is to involve school principals in decision making:

*...officials of education do not return to the principals of schools in the plans' preparation stage as related to the schools. They should involve those who work in the field. This leads to incomplete plans and a lack of cooperation between planners and implementers... (survey open questions).*

Another statement by a principal who felt negatively about this said:

*... I do not have the authority to make decisions and I am under pressure every day from the students, parents, the community, the teachers, the educational office and the Ministry of Education. There is no attention from officials toward school principals, even the authority that the Ministry of Education claimed to*



*grant to school leaders has not been implemented seriously... (survey open questions).*

Likewise, the school principals interviewed felt that they were neglected, and were not generally given the chance to participate in decision making. They thought that the Ministry of Education and decision makers ignored their voices, which negatively affects their attitudes, enthusiasm and performance. For example, Saad, a head teacher with three years of experience of teaching and five years of experience as a principal, said:

*... I have more than fifteen years' experience working at the school and no one asked me about my opinion of the decisions that are made or the appropriate decisions that should be taken... (Saad-semi-structured interviews-1).*

The school principals criticised the lack of participation in school development policies, as Faisal, a head teacher with six years of experience of teaching and six years of experience as a principal, explained:

*...when we feel we have more attention from the Ministry of Education, through participating in decision making, and taking part in the school development planning, curriculum and improvement ideas, I think we will have more enthusiasm. Unfortunately, we currently only know the new development notions at the beginning of their implementation ... (Faisal-semi-structured interviews-1).*

Ali, an educational expert with 20 years of experience in education argued that granting school principals greater autonomy to make their own decisions would be a sign of appropriate attention:

*...I think giving the school principals more attention, delegating more authority, giving them more autonomy, so they can take part in decision making, will have a positive impact on work within the school ... (semi-structured interviews-2).*

The results exposed the fact that school principals feel neglected because the Ministry of Education and education departments in their provinces has not generally involved them in any decision-making processes. They believe that they can add value to plans and strategies before their implementation when allowed to participate. Moreover, they want to be able to lead their schools autonomously.

These results are in agreement with Al-Saud's (2009) findings which showed that most subordinates wish to participate in decision making at all levels of administration. Also, these results are in accord with Shabat's (2015) study that claimed 76.3% of administrators have a desire to see, and encourage, the transfer and delegation of authority. Thus, it is important to include all staff in any proposed organisational leadership structure change (Floyd & Preston, 2017). For example, shifting to decentralisation and applying school autonomy is an important change that principals and teachers should have a voice before any implementation.

In addition, transferring decision making to schools will empower principals and teachers in the sense of strengthening their professional motivation, thereby enhancing their sense of school ownership (Patrinos & Fasih, 2009). Also, motivation is essential for school principal satisfaction because it affects the decision making and quality of performance in the school.

#### **6.2.5 Centralised System and Bureaucracy**

Lauglo (1997) linked bureaucracy to centralisation, and defined it as follows:

*Bureaucratic centralism implies concentrating in a central 'top' authority decision making on a wide range of matters, leaving only tightly programmed routine implementation to lower levels in the organisation ... a ministry could make decisions in considerable detail as to aims and objectives, curricula and teaching materials to be used, prescribed methods, appointments of staff and their job descriptions, admission of students, assessment and certification, finance and budgets, and evaluations to monitor performance (Lauglo, 1997, pp. 3-4).*

A major theme revealed, via 19 individuals surveyed who answered the open questions and a further nine principals and four educational experts interviewed, that bureaucracy in education is one the main challenges facing school principals. One such individual explained how decisions and procedures take a long time to effect because of bureaucracy:

*... because of the centralisation, routine, overlapping tasks, unjustified requests, there is no motive for me to be a school principal. The solutions to problems that should be solved by the Ministry of Education take a long time and sometimes they do not find solutions... (survey open questions).*

Another statement by a principal:

*...the management system in the Ministry of Education affects basic matters, for example, the maintenance of the necessary and urgent aspects in the facilities of the school, takes months to gain approval for from the MoE, sometimes as a school principal I must pay money from my own account to repair damage to the school buildings ... (survey open questions).*

Moving to the interview data, the participants argued that bureaucracy is an obstacle that negatively affects school performance. Salah, a principal with eight years of teaching experience and six years of experience as a principal, explained how bureaucracy causes problems at his school:

*... bureaucracy has hindered work and caused many educational problems. For example, when you have a teacher in the school who does not commit to daily attendance and does not prepare his lessons, the school principal is unable to take any action except sending a report to the Education Bureau and the General Administration of Public Education and wait until they respond. This process may take months or even years to decide on the teacher. However, you can imagine that during this period this teacher's students go without an education or are less education than expected. Therefore, granting the school management power over such decisions will solve many of the problems caused by the current bureaucracy... (Salah-semi-structured interviews-1).*

This view was also supported by another principal who pointed out that making decisions regarding teachers' issues via the appropriate official channels takes a long time. They requested greater autonomy to be able to quickly deal with such major issues.

*...addressing teachers' problems such as their absence and poor performance take about two years to solve or to move these teachers to another position. It is a serious matter, but if school principals have proper authority, they can find a solution quickly... (Nasir-semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another principal expressed his anger because of the delays in repairing interruptions to his school's internet access because of the associated bureaucracy that makes such urgent issues take an excessively long time:

*...one of the biggest challenges for me is frequent internet interruptions. It has become very important in the administrative process and for teaching some courses. Repairing the Internet takes weeks and leaves me paralysed because of bureaucracy ... (Khalid-semi-structured interviews-1).*

These findings highlight the fact that under the central educational management system, school leadership is a challenging job for the various reasons discussed thus far, and which are compounded by the Ministry of Education who does not deal with the schools' problems and difficulties quickly or effectively because of the associated bureaucracy.

These results seem to be consistent with the research mentioned in the literature review. Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) point out that allowing decisions to be made via school leaders allowed them to deal with crises quickly and effectively. This means that keeping the decision making in high levels of education management such as the Ministry of Education and educational management in each district will make school principals job more difficult. This is reflected in the school performance when shifting to decentralisation as Trimmer's (2013) who found that with the increasing diversity in schools and the call to address specific regional needs, decentralised regulation of the education system is often proposed as an alternative approach to achieving improvement in schools.

These results also support the idea of Herbert A. Simon's conception of the global rationality of neoclassical theory, which assumes that the decision maker has a comprehensive, consistent utility function, knows all the alternatives that are available, can determine the

expected value of utility associated with each alternative, and chooses the alternative that maximises the expected utility (Barros, 2010). In addition, there is some research that indicated the negative impact of bureaucracy, for example, Bush (2008) points to some of the weaknesses of bureaucracy in education through two cases in South America and Greece. Newland (1995) argued that “the excessive centralisation and bureaucratisation, which continue to exist in South America in spite of the reforms undertaken, affect the efficiency of the system” (p. 113). Also, in Greece “the state should start moving towards restructuring the organisation of schools. Less complexity, formalisation and centralisation of the system, and more extended professionalism and autonomy of teachers and head teachers would be beneficial” (Kavouri & Ellis, 1998, p. 106). Another example of the drawbacks of the bureaucracy via Duignan and Macpherson (2003) who refers to fundamental criticisms of bureaucracy such as its dangerous inability to respond to feedback on correctness and significance. He called for the necessity to reconstruct Weber’s (1947) ideal characteristics of the bureaucratic organisation.

These results point out that the move to decentralisation in the management of education may help to overcome the many and various challenges it currently faces. As Lai-ngok (2004) indicated, decentralisation increases efficiency and frees schools from the bureaucracy of centralised systems, it can thus be suggested that granting schools greater autonomy under decentralisation to make decisions will help to solve schools’ problems much more quickly. These findings suggest that school principals are likely to be the best individuals to deal with school issues; they have all the information required to do so and are aware of all the alternatives that can be used for student assessment in order to make appropriate decisions. Thus, putting decision making in their hands would appear to be better than leaving this responsibility to higher levels in the education authority.

### 6.2.6 School buildings and environment

The data also yielded another major challenge from amongst 15 surveyed participants who answered the open questions and twelve interviewees, both principals and educational experts, that existing school buildings have many defects. Having greater autonomy to prepare the school environment could reduce these shortcomings, according to these individuals.

For example, from the survey data, principals clarified how the existing design of school buildings is inappropriate and they demonstrated their willingness to be involved in preparing more appropriate premises:

*...there is a need to review the existing design, in terms of roles, public appearance, facilities and green areas. I think when the school leaders are involved in the process of designing the school buildings, this will solve many of the existing problems... (survey open questions).*

Principals of rental schools pointed out that their schools do not fit educational needs and do not help the implementation of new teaching approaches:

*...the current school building is rental and is not suitable, old and needs maintenance, but even if it is repaired it would not serve modern teaching methods, nor does it attract students. This is important, as learners should feel comfortable in their place of learning... (survey open questions).*

Moving on to consider the data from the semi-structured interviews, one respondent explained that their current school buildings were themselves a barrier to its management:

*...my first problem is the school building; it is not properly equipped. Here, we have no rooms for a computer lab and a science lab, and the library needs to be prepared. I just try to form partnerships with certain organisations to ensure that students have the appropriate facilities to do their activities. Also, this building is not suitable for the supervision and monitoring of students... (Khalid - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Similarly, another respondent from the interviews contended that the rental school buildings were one of the main challenges they faced.

*...away from the quality of the building and its design to keep pace with modern teaching techniques. I am concerned because it is not provided with security and safety equipment and emergency exits which may cause difficulties in a serious situation. It is an old rented building with four floors and not prepared for education... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

From the educational experts' interviews, Hamad, with 25 years of experience in education, explained how the school environment affects student learning:

*...the classroom is not well prepared, sometimes the number of students is too large, and with the high temperature the teacher and students suffer during the lessons, the school principal does not have the authority to increase the number of classrooms, as well as not having the budget to improve the classrooms. This all must wait to get the approval of the Ministry of Education to maintain the school and this usually requires a long time... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*



The findings suggest that school buildings, including facilities and equipment, is a key challenge to school principals, where some of the buildings are rented and not prepared for teaching and do not have the basic equipment required, whether for student safety or teaching techniques. They also emphasise the importance of the school environment and its impact on the students and their relationship with the school.

The results are in agreement with Hannah (2013), in that classroom disciplinary climate is associated with student performance. In addition, the classroom environment plays a crucial role in keeping students engaged and allowing them to be successful within the classroom. Thus, it can be seen that through decentralisation the school becomes responsible for their own maintenance, such as in New Zealand since 1989. Each school's board of trustees are mostly made up of elected parent representatives and funded via a five-year budget to carry out their own maintenance. It is possible, therefore, that those who are closest to where education takes place are best suited to creating the optimum environments for their students and teachers. It can also be suggested that the Ministry of Education should establish a board of trustees to work with a designer, a project manager and a construction company when new schools are going to be built, which should include school leaders. The reason for this is that such a board would ensure that the new school will meet the needs of quality teaching, the curriculum and the community (Sheerin, 2008).

#### **6.2.7 Continuous Assessment**

Only seven of the people surveyed who answered the open questions reported that continuous assessment in primary schools "which the Ministry of Education began to implement in 1999" (Al-dawood, 2004) represented a challenge to them. However, eight of the interviewees, both principals and educational experts, felt that continuous assessment is

a challenge that principals of primary schools currently face. They also indicated various reasons for these challenges, such as the lack of qualifications and training amongst teachers.

Participants seemed to recognise the importance of continuous assessment as an effective tool for assessing the educational attainment amongst students. However, they currently believe that it is ineffective and may have a negative impact on students' results because of improper implementation. A comment from the survey by a school principal:

*... although there are some positive aspects of the continuous assessment system at the primary level, such as reducing students' fear of exams and helping teachers to focus on improving the pupils' skills, its negative aspects are more obvious in the absence of any proper implementation, and the Ministry of Education is responsible for that... (survey open questions).*

In the school principals' interviews, Sami explained the reality of continuous assessment:

*... continuous assessment is an applicable idea and it is implemented in many developed countries in education, but we have some obstacles that limit its success such as a large number of students per class, the lack of parents' understanding of the assessment methods, and the absence of experts who can properly evaluate its implementation... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Respondents explain the impact of this issue on a long-term basis in terms of student progress.

One said:

*...the weakness of the primary stage results shows the size of the problem of continuous assessment. For example, some students in their first year of*

*secondary school are not able to read and write to the required level. This means they are not ready for this stage because they pass year six in primary school by continuous assessment... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

From another angle, an educational expert indicated the impact of competition among pupils which might be reduced through continuous assessment. Also, he reported that teachers should be accountable for improving their performance. He said:

*...I think that one of the reasons for the inefficiency of continuous assessment in primary schools is the absence of competition among students, where there are no grades, as well as the lack of accountability for the performance of teachers of the assessing process... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The clear message from these results is that the current continuous assessment methods applied in primary schools is one of the challenges that face school principals. They reported many possible reasons for this issue arising such as the lack of teacher training in the use of this type of assessment, and a large number of students in the classroom.

Similar results were found in a recent study by Abejehu (2016), where a discrepancy between the perceived purpose of continuous assessment and its actual practice was reported. In addition, the practice of continuous assessment in primary schools appears to lack harmony and consistency. The study suggests developing a more harmonised continuous assessment policy and guidelines. In addition, Al-Abdulkareem (2004) found that Saudi teachers lacked the skills to assess student performance appropriately. This meant they needed more training as to how to assess the academic achievement of students through the continuous assessment method. Further research by Al-Jarjeer (2007) and Al-Shehri (2006) indicated different reasons for the lack of continuous assessment in primary schools. They reported that

educators in Saudi Arabia have noted the fact that large numbers of students in the class can affect the application of the new method of assessment in primary schools. Also, Alotabi (2014) found that a large number of students in the classroom imposes limitations on the classroom activities and strongly recommended that reforming the assessment practices used by the Saudi education system is essential. In addition, he argued that the large numbers of students in classrooms prevents teachers from following students' individual progress and giving suitable feedback.

### **6.2.8 Freedom and creativity**

Of the 68 participants who completed the open questionnaire, only six indicated the impact of lack of authority on the creativity of their job. However, eight of those interviewed indicated the importance of autonomy for principals, and they linked this to creative performance. One principal articulated this issue as follows:

*... it is hard to be creative if the system is centralised. A principal currently does not think about creativity, but aims to do their job exactly as the education bureau plan... (survey open questions).*

The principals interviewed spoke about their need for creative factors such as the authority to make decisions and support from the MoE; one said:

*... I think that some of the schools' leaders have initiatives, and some of them are enthusiastic and some of them looking for excellence, but they are handcuffed. The reason is the lack of granted authority. I believe that if principals are granted more authority, they will be more creative as well as having the support of the Ministry of Education including staff and teachers, professional*

*and technical assistance, and the ability to prepare an attractive environment...*

*(Nasir-structured interviews-1).*

Umar, an educational expert with 21 years of experience in education, explained the gap between ambition and reality in terms of creativity in schools:

*...I know some principals who want to create educational and entertainment activities for students, as well as conducting new teaching methods. However, in the presence of centralisation, this orientation is not applicable ... (Umar-semi-structured interviews-2).*

Another educational expert commented:

*...Creativity needs an environment where freedom is available, both in terms of the principal of the school, teachers and students. The presence of restrictions imposed by the Ministry of Education limits creativity and this undoubtedly affects students and their futures ... (Hassan-semi-structured interviews-2).*

The results show that principals felt that their current circumstances in the workplace environment act as barriers to creativity (Shalley, Gilson, & Blum, 2000), for them as well as for teachers and students. The motivation to be creative currently does not exist.

These results corroborate the ideas of Maslow's theory (1943) that individuals require freedom in their workplace to encourage creativity (AlKandari, 2013). Also, in agreement with other researchers, it is perceived that autonomy is the main factor in facilitating creativity (Craft, 2005). For example, Zhang and Bartol (2010) examined the link between empowering leadership and employee creativity in China. They found that empowering leadership

positively affected psychological empowerment, which in turn influenced both intrinsic motivation and creative process engagement. Bosiok and Sad (2013) also indicated “a significant correlation between the latent dimensions of the creativity construct and those of autocratic, democratic and liberal leadership styles” (p. 64). In addition, Hirst, Van Knippenberg, Chen & Sacramento (2011) argued that learning and goal orientations had, respectively, stronger positive relationships with creativity under low centralisation. Thus, shifting to decentralisation may seem to be an appropriate step towards granting school principals greater authority and giving them the chance to be more creative.

In addition, there are a number of studies that have linked autonomy to creativity. For example, Smith and Greyling (2007) asserted that educational managers should have full control over their work, be given more challenging tasks, be rewarded for competence and innovation, be allowed to continue to improve their knowledge and skills, and be exposed to creative problem solving. Zhang and Bartol (2010), through their research into the link between empowering leadership with creativity, found that “as anticipated, empowering leadership positively affected psychological empowerment, which in turn influenced both intrinsic motivation and creative process engagement” (p. 107). Employee creativity can fundamentally contribute to organisational innovation, efficiency, and continuity (Amabile, 1996; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004). Creativity can be correlated with the production of new and useful ideas by a group of individuals working together or even by a single individual (Amabile, 1988; Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002; Shalley et al., 2000). For creativity to flourish in organisations, managers need to support and promote it, as they are the individuals who are most knowledgeable about which employee work outcomes are likely to be most creative and have considerable influence over the context within which creativity can occur (Shalley & Gilson, 2004).

### 6.2.9 Motivation among teachers

Only eight participants in the open survey questions and six interviewees indicated the lack of motivation among teachers is a particular challenge they face in the course of school management, which they believed could be overcome if they had greater autonomy to manage their schools. First, explaining the issue of poor motivation among teachers, one interviewee said:

*...I feel that the motivation of some teachers is very weak, many of them have joined the field purely to get a job, and have no desire to practice teaching. This is obvious through their performance and their reactions to my instructions within the school... (Saad- semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another interviewee noted the influence of motivation on teachers' engagement with new teaching approaches:

*... when we apply a certain teaching strategy, some teachers are not motivated to use them. I understand how the impact of their attitudes and enthusiasm within the classroom on teaching and contact with students. I try to encourage them but sometimes I fail at this ... (Salah-semi-structured interviews-1).*

The workplace environment and job satisfaction were two of the major factors that the interviewees felt affected teachers' motivation. Herzberg's (2008) motivational-hygiene theory emphasises the importance of internal job factors as motivating forces for employees and that jobs should be redesigned to provide the highest number of motivational opportunities. An educational expert clarified the link between certain elements and teachers' motivations:

*...motivation and dedication to teaching among teachers are linked to many factors, such as job satisfaction, adequate qualifications, incentives for excellence, and attractive teaching rooms and facilities. These elements help teachers to perform well, but nowadays most of these factors are not available... (Yasir-semi-structured interviews-2).*

The results indicate that the lack of motivation amongst some teachers negatively affects the performance and achievement of their pupils. However, giving teachers more responsibility and ownership of decision-making processes could improve this. It can thus be suggested that giving school principals greater autonomy is a great chance for them to delegate to teachers and involve them in decision making within the school. According to Wadesango and Bayaga (2013), teachers desired much greater involvement in critical issues and wanted to be consulted before important decisions were taken. Also, teachers further wanted their views to be heard and acknowledged by the school system.

One anticipated finding was that there are many differences between the interview responses of principals working in Riyadh and Sabya regarding the main challenges currently facing school principals in the KSA. However, there were no differences except for the challenges of school buildings and the environment, because many school buildings in Sabya were rental. For example, the principals who emphasized that school buildings were one of the main challenges were almost invariably from Sabya (Sami and Khalid, see Table 5.3) and whose schools were rental; indeed, the educational expert who considered the size of classrooms to be a challenge for principals was also from Sabya (Hamad, see Table 5.4). This means that participants from Sabya were more cautious about implementing autonomy in rented schools than participants from Riyadh, where most school buildings were prepared by the government for educational purposes.



### **6.2.10 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings concerning the challenges facing school principals as gathered from open questions in the survey and semi-structured interviews. The respondents reported that they, as leaders, faced challenges to their leadership because of the restrictions and limitations associated with the centralised system and the MoE's policies. The schools' principals wanted greater autonomy to overcome these difficulties without the need to turn to help from high-level officials in the MoE. The results suggest that decentralisation and granting principals greater autonomy may help to overcome these shortcomings. The next chapter will present and analyse the data in order to answer the second research question about the readiness of school principals for greater school autonomy.

## **Chapter 7: Data analysis and discussion (2)**

**RQ2: What are school principals' perceptions of their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making?**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the data collected from the survey with school principals and semi-structured interviews conducted with principals and education experts. In order to answer both RQ2 and RQ3. It will be organised into two sections; each section answers one question. Each section contains the findings from analyses of quantitative and qualitative data. Specifically, the quantitative section of RQ2 sets out principals' perceptions of their abilities in terms of school management and planning, including the management of students and communication and development skills. Qualitative results focus on principals' perceptions of their ability to develop plans and set goals, undertake decision making, financial resource management, manage the recruitment and selection of teachers, performance evaluation, raise academic standards and results and curricula development. In the qualitative section of the findings, the principals' interviews will first be presented followed by the results of the interviews with educational experts.

### **7.2 Quantitative results**

Overall, the results from the survey indicate that school principals have the ability to manage their schools independently. Respondents were more positive about their skills of management and planning, dealing with student issues and communication and development

skills. However, they were less positive about their skills in terms of dealing with teacher issues and curricula. The quantitative data is presented in detail in the following section.

### 7.2.1 Male principals' Ability to Manage and Plan

The survey data suggest that the majority of male school principals currently believe they have the abilities and skills needed to manage and lead their schools autonomously, as shown in Table (7.1).

*Table 7.1 Management and planning skills of male school principals*

Male principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Management and Planning skills	Identify strengths and weaknesses	81	86.2%	13	13.8%
	Set priorities	81	86.2%	13	13.8%
	Determine equipment and human needs	80	85.1%	14	14.9%
	Evaluate the performance of the school	73	77.7%	21	22.3%
	Make good decisions	69	73.4%	25	26.6%
	Set the budget and spend it appropriately	64	68.1%	30	31.9%
	Develop educational goals	65	69.1%	29	30.9%

These results suggest that male school principals strongly believe in their ability to identify strengths and weaknesses within their schools and set priorities (86.2%, n = 81); indeed, only 13 participants (13.8%) claimed not to possess these skills. A somewhat lower proportion of participants, 68.1%, believed that they would be able to set the budget and spend it appropriately. A possible explanation for this might be that a number of principals need more training because, as this thesis will discuss later, most of the interviewees emphasised that training is needed before the implementation of school autonomy.

Around a quarter (26.6%) of principals surveyed claimed to be underconfident in making decisions. Although nearly three-quarters (73.4%) did feel confident with decision making, these findings suggest associated training and development is nevertheless needed. This result may be explained by the fact that some of the current principals are not qualified as managers through their own subject specialties and, to compound matters, they suffer from a lack of in-service training, as shown in chapter 9. Thus, ensuring that school leaders have the appropriate preparation and training to be confident about making decisions should be a key prerequisite to being assigned to the role of principal.

### 7.2.2 Female principals' Ability to Manage and Plan

The survey data suggest that the majority of female school principals currently believe they have the abilities and skills needed to manage and lead their schools autonomously, as shown in Table (7.2).

*Table 7.2 Management and planning skills of female school principals*

Female principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Management and Planning skills	Identify strengths and weaknesses	49	94.2%	3	5.8%
	Set priorities	49	94.2%	3	5.8%
	Determine equipment and human needs	50	96.2%	2	3.8%
	Evaluate the performance of the school	41	78.8%	11	21.2%
	Make good decisions	39	75.0%	13	25.0%
	Set the budget and spend it appropriately	42	80.8%	10	19.2%
	Develop educational goals	38	73.1%	14	26.9%

Similarly, these results suggest female school principals strongly believe in their ability to determine human needs and equipment (86.2%, n = 81). Only two participants (3.8%) claimed

not to possess these skills. A somewhat lower proportion of participants, 73.1%, believed that they would be able to develop educational goals. Overall, female principals felt slightly more confident than male principals of their ability to manage schools and having planning skills. For example, 94.2% (n = 49) of female principals felt they were able to identify strengths and weaknesses and set priorities, while 86.2% (n = 81) of male principals felt they were able to identify strengths and weaknesses and set priorities.

These results are in line with Almula's (2011) study, which aimed to identify how school principals practice management skills in the city of Al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. She found that school principals practice the skills of planning and decision making in their schools. In addition, these results seem to be in line with the outcomes of Alharthi's (2015) study, which aimed to determine the reality of school principals' practise of administrative and supervisory skills in schools in Oman. He found that school principals practice strategic planning to develop the performances of their schools. Moreover, the findings support the study by Alhammadi (2018) which reveals that leadership practices in outstanding schools included a number of common features, such as establishing school vision and strategic planning.

### **7.2.3 Male principals' Ability to Manage Teachers**

The survey sought to elicit a degree of insight into male principals' perceptions of their ability to manage staff. Human resource management is an important aspect of school administration, for which school principals would become fully responsible if school autonomy were to be implemented. Therefore, the responses to these questions provide a good indication of male principals' readiness for school autonomy and help to identify areas requiring future professional development. The results of this section are set out in Table (7.3).

*Table 7.3 Male principals' ability to manage teachers.*

Male principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Teachers' issues	Identify training needs and deliver appropriate CPD for teachers	73	77.7%	21	22.3%
	Select teachers according to specific criteria	62	66.0%	32	34.0%
	Devise appropriate rules, sanctions and incentives for teachers	63	67.0%	31	33.0%
	Appoint teachers and dismiss them according to school need	58	61.7%	36	38.3%

CPD: Continuing Professional Development

As shown in Table (7.3), male school principals appeared confident in their ability to identify training needs and deliver appropriate continuous professional development, such as with training courses for teachers; however, 21 (22.3%) still felt they lacked this ability. Overall, two-thirds of those surveyed agreed that they were capable of selecting teachers according to specific criteria, and would also be capable of devising appropriate rules, sanctions and incentives for teachers. However, that still leaves a notable proportion of school principals that would require further training to develop confidence in their abilities to perform those management tasks within the context of a more autonomous school management system.

## 7.2.4 Female principals' Ability to Manage Teachers

*Table 7.4 Female principals' ability to manage teachers.*

Female principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Teachers' issues	Identify training needs and deliver appropriate CPD for teachers	40	76.9%	12	23.1%
	Select teachers according to specific criteria	37	71.2%	15	28.8%
	Devise appropriate rules, sanctions and incentives for teachers	36	69.2%	16	30.8%
	Appoint teachers and dismiss them according to school need	38	73.1%	14	26.9%

The survey also showed, as per Table (7.4), similar results for female school principals' ability to identify training needs and deliver appropriate continuing professional development for teachers. However, the female principals felt more confident about appointing teachers and dismissing them according to school need (73.1%, n = 38), while male principals were less confident in this ability (61.7%, n = 58).

These findings were supported by Nuhaily's (2010) research, which aimed to discover the role of school principals in raising the adequacy of teachers. His study emphasized the importance of the role of school principals in raising teachers' abilities in several areas such as the scientific, social and self-confidence, as well as help teachers to develop the solving problems skills and their use of new teaching methods. In addition, these results are consistent with those of Almula (2011) in the sense that school principals practice team-work building and human relations skills with their staff, and the ideas of Finnigan (2012) in that in autonomous schools, principals can improve the motivation of teachers. This finding also broadly supports the work of other studies, such as those by Al-Muhailbi et al. (2016), who found that the majority of school principals had a good understanding in areas of the professional

development of teachers. Additionally, Paletta (2014) indicated that there is a growing body of research linking school autonomy and performance which should lead to the effects of school autonomy having a positive effect on the performance of teachers and staff.

### 7.2.5 Male principals' Ability to Manage Students

The survey aimed to gain male principals' perceptions of their abilities to manage students. Giving school greater autonomy would make all students' issues the responsibility of their school principals. Thus, the results offer a clear indication of male principals' capabilities regarding greater autonomy in terms of pupils' affairs. The results of this section are set out in Table (7.5).

*Table 7.5 Male principals' abilities to manage students' issues.*

Male principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Students' issues	Support the ideas of innovation from students	81	86.2%	13	13.8%
	Set the solutions for lacks in academic achievement	79	84.0%	15	16.0%
	Make a balance between using technology and direct connection between students and teachers	72	76.6%	22	23.4%
	Provide learners with various sources of information	60	63.8%	34	36.2%

As shown in Table (7.5), the majority of male principals were positive about their capabilities to support students' innovation; however, 13 (13.8%) were not confident in this regard. Overall, more than two-thirds of those surveyed agreed that they were capable of finding solutions to any lack in academic achievement and in ensuring the balance between the use of technology and the direct connection between students and teachers. However, one-third



of male principals (36.2%) felt that they were not qualified to provide learners with various sources of information.

### 7.2.6 Female principals' Ability to Manage Students

*Table 7.6 Female principals' abilities to manage students' issues.*

Female principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Students' issues	Support the ideas of innovation from students	45	86.5%	7	13.5%
	Set the solutions for lacks in academic achievement	46	88.5%	6	11.5%
	Make a balance between using technology and direct connection between students and teachers	45	86.5%	7	13.5%
	Provide learners with various sources of information	36	69.2%	16	30.8%

On the other hand, overall results from the survey show that female principals were confident of their ability to manage students' issues. In general, there were no differences between male and female perceptions of their ability to deal with students matters. However, female principals felt more confident about their capability to strike the balance between the use of technology and direct connection (86.5%) than male principals, in which 23.4% of male principals felt they would be unable to manage this matter (as in Table 7.6).

These results are consistent with those of Ashoor & Alshaqran (2015) which aimed to identify the role of the school principal on administrative reform within schools in light of new working skills. They found that the school principal plays a key role in managing student matters. In addition, the results are consistent with the research of Lydiah & Nasongo (2009) who investigated the role of the headteacher in academic achievement in Kenya, finding that headteachers were involved in academic activities by observing and checking their students'

work, monitoring their discipline and helping in the eradication of cheating during examinations.

These results are in agreement with the findings of other studies such as those by Al-Muhailbi et al. (2016), who found that the majority of school principals had a good understanding in areas of student achievement. In addition, Hanushek et al. (2013) contended that local autonomy has a major influence on student achievement. Similarly, Paletta (2014) investigated the influence of school autonomy on student achievement, showing that granting schools greater autonomy could improve student achievement.

### 7.2.7 Male principals' Ability to Manage the Curriculum

The survey sought to draw male and female principals' insights of their abilities to manage curricula in autonomous schools. The responses to these questions deliver the clear message that the curriculum was an issue that both male and female school principals were less confident of their ability to achieve it. The results of this section are set out in Table (7.7) and Table (7.8).

*Table 7.7 Male principals' abilities to manage curricula.*

Male principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Curriculum issues	Use modern methods to achieve curriculum objectives	67	71.3%	27	28.7%
	Identify the strength and weakness in the curricula through specialist teams	60	63.8%	34	36.2%
	Lead specialist teams to evaluate the curriculum	43	45.7%	51	54.3%
	Lead the specialist teams to build a suitable curriculum	39	41.5%	55	58.5%

As shown in Table (7.7), male school principals appeared the most confident in their ability to use modern methods to achieve curriculum objectives, however, 27 (28.7%) still felt they lacked this ability. The results showed that more than half of male school principals agreed they were capable of identifying the strengths and weaknesses in curricula through specialist teams. However, 55 (58.5%) were not able to lead the specialist teams to build a suitable curriculum.

### 7.2.8 Female principals' Ability to Manage the Curriculum

*Table 7.8 Female principals' abilities to manage curricula.*

Female principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Curriculum issues	Use modern methods to achieve curriculum objectives	36	69.2%	16	30.8%
	Identify the strength and weakness in the curricula through specialist teams	37	71.2%	15	28.8%
	Lead specialist teams to evaluate the curriculum	30	57.7%	22	42.3%
	Lead the specialist teams to build a suitable curriculum	28	53.8%	24	46.2%

The results as in Table (7.8) showed that 71.2% of female respondents were able to identify the strength and weakness in the curricula through specialist teams, while only 28.8% of the female principals felt they were not able to manage this matter. More than half of female participants were positive about their ability to lead specialist teams to evaluate the curriculum and subsequently build a more suitable curriculum. Although both male and female principals were not more positive of their ability to manage curriculum issues, the female principals were slightly more confident. Thus, these results confirm the importance of training principals and preparing them before leading autonomous schools. In addition, these findings revealed the need to implement autonomy in schools gradually, in which the more

complicated issues, such as developing curricula for advanced stages of autonomy, would be left until later.

These results seem to be in line with those of Al-Sarayrah & Abu-hmaid (2016) in the sense that only about half of school principals play a significant role in the dissemination of information and communication technology within their schools as part of curriculum. A possible explanation for these observations is that managing curriculum matters might need more professional skills. These results also are in line with those of Kobola (2009), in that the school principal should consider the hidden curriculum in all activities and determine areas that need monitoring. Furthermore, the principal should focus on the curriculum, which presents itself as the public face of the school.

#### **7.2.9 Communication Skills for male principals**

The survey aimed to elicit male principals' perceptions of their communication and development skills. Building partnerships with external bodies is an essential aspect of school management, and in autonomous schools, principals will have the authority to form these relationships. In this regard, the male respondents to the survey showed their capability to practice development skills and their readiness to build partnerships with related organisations, though they appeared less confident to build partnerships with specialised educational providers to improve curricula. The results of this section are set out in Table (7.9).

*Table 7.9 Male principals' abilities to communicate with others.*

Principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Communication skills	Build relationships with external organisations	75	79.8%	19	20.2%
	Balance between importing useful ideas and hold values of society	63	67.0%	31	33.0%
	Keep pace with digital developments and the information revolution	64	68.1%	30	31.9%
	Build partnerships with specialised educational providers to improve the curriculum	46	48.9%	48	51.1%

As shown in Table (7.9), male school principals were confident of their abilities to build relationships with external organisations; however, 19 (20.2%) still felt they would be unable to develop these partnerships. More than two-thirds of those surveyed agreed that male principals have the capability to strike the balance between importing useful ideas and holding with the values of society and still keep pace with digital development and the information revolution. However, there was a notable proportion of male principals, 48 (51.1%) that felt they would need further training and help to build partnerships with specialised educational providers in relation to curriculum development.

#### **7.2.10 Communication Skills for female principals**

Overall, female school principals were more positive in their ability (92.3%) to build relationships with external organisations compared to male school principals (79.8%). In addition, more than half (57.7%) of female principals felt that they would be able to build partnerships with specialised educational providers to improve their curricula, while male principals were less confident (48.9%) of their ability in this regard (see Table 7.9 & Table 7.10). This result emphasises the previous results that both male and female principals were not ready to build partnerships in relation to curriculum development.

*Table 7.10 Female principals' abilities to communicate with others.*

Female principals' ability to		Agree		Disagree	
		N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Communication skills	Build relationships with external organisations	48	92.3%	4	7.7%
	Balance between importing useful ideas and hold values of society	41	78.8%	11	21.2%
	Keep pace with digital developments and the information revolution	34	65.4%	18	34.6%
	Build partnerships with specialised educational providers to improve the curriculum	30	57.7%	22	42.3%

The findings support the study by Alhammadi (2018) which revealed that leadership practices in outstanding schools included a number of common features, such as effective communication. Arlestig (2008) argued that in the successful schools, principals and teachers communicated more frequently about issues related to teaching and learning. In addition, the communication process supports long-term work towards positive school outcomes to a greater extent. Similarly, the findings of Moos, Krejsler, Kofod, and Jensen (2005) argued that principals' communication skills are significant in ensuring the efficiency of communication procedures within schools.

All previous related studies in the Saudi context that have considered school principals' perceptions of their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making have been undertaken with single sex samples. For example, Nuhaily's (2010) and Alhammadi's (2018) research was conducted with male principals, while Almula's (2011) was conducted with female principals. Moreover, the majority of previous empirical studies to consider the Saudi context discussed in Chapter Four have been undertaken with single sex samples. For example, the work conducted by Al-Saud (2009), Allheaniy (2012), Alotaibi

(2013), Al-Thaqafi (2014) have all been undertaken with male participants, whereas the work by Al-Balawi and Ahmad (2016) and Alyami (2016) was undertaken with female participants. To provide new and original insights into this issue, the present study investigates both genders to determine any differences between male and female school principals' perceptions of school reform in the KSA.

The most interesting aspect of the survey results was that the female principals were slightly more confident than male principals with regards to certain aspects of their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making, such as their ability to manage schools and apply planning skills, appoint teachers and dismiss them, strike the balance between the use of technology and direct connection, and manage curriculum issues and build relationships with external organisations. Al-Shamrani (2015) also revealed similar results, indicating that female Saudi managers are as effective as their male counterparts, and indeed that they even score slightly higher than men.

An implication of these results in the Saudi context, where women are less empowered than men in leadership positions, is that of providing a better understanding of women's ability and confidence to make their own decisions and lead schools autonomously. A possible explanation for this might be that Saudi women are trying to prove their ability to lead organisations in which they previously have lacked resources and felt powerless because of gender bias (Alsuwaida, 2016). Therefore, these results reflect an enhanced role for women as they attempt to hold positions of senior leadership in educational institutions. For example, managing the curriculum appears to be one of the more complicated matters in schools according to the results of the present study; however, female principals in this study felt

more confident than men in this regard which may be an indicator that women perceive that they are ready to take on more complex tasks in educational institutions.

Another implication of these results is that of opening an increased number of opportunities for women to find jobs, as they perceive that they have the right management and communication skills necessary to be successful in these positions. This finding corresponds to the “introduction of sweeping reforms in the national education system which is a major step in preparing Saudi women for competitive jobs” (Varshney, 2019, p. 359). Over the last few decades, Saudi women have not been offered the opportunity to hold leadership positions, however, recently, new initiatives offered by the government have created chances for women to be involved. Thus, these results might be an indicator of women’s desire and readiness to occupy such positions.



### 7.3 Qualitative Results

Through semi-structured interviews with principals and education experts, the study sought to elicit deeper insights as to the extent to which school principals were ready to lead schools autonomously. In the interviews, they were asked about their ability in this regard. Overall, the findings show the majority of principals felt that they had the capabilities to manage their schools autonomously. In this section, the themes were arrived at through the analysis of the data will be presented in more detail, starting with the skills principals believe autonomy would allow them to practice the most. The principals' interviews will first be presented, followed by those of the educational experts.

#### 7.3.1 Setting plans and goals

Eight school principals and four educational experts who were interviewed felt that principals have the ability to set school plans and goals. For instance, as this school principal said:

*...I feel that I need some skills but not all of them. For example, I can practice some skills such as setting plans while I need more training in prioritising. The school leader cannot have all leadership skills. Thus, the school principal can ask for help in some tasks or delegate specialists... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another respondent commented:

*... the principal currently prepares the schools' plan, but sometimes we do not have the tools to implement our plans... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another educational expert highlighted the fact that the required readiness is not currently present, and there are differences between planning for the current school system and more autonomous schools, which would require more training:

*...planning and setting goals are basic skills of any school principal, but I think there is a need for further training, because the planning of independent schools, will be different, from the current school planning ... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The results suggest that school principals are generally ready for greater school autonomy but are not completely equipped with the skills, or indeed necessarily have the confidence, needed to prepare and implement plans and set educational goals. Principals may be deficient in some aspects of their leadership skills, but the key task of developing and plans and setting educational goals would be reviewed by school boards, not only by the individual principals in an autonomous school system. Nevertheless, these are key skills that should be considered in the selection of school principals in light of the possible shift to greater school autonomy in Saudi Arabia.

These findings reflect the readiness and willingness of principals to assume greater autonomy. One of the basic skills required of a school leader is their ability to develop appropriate plans and methods that achieve the ultimate goals of education. When schools are independent in terms of their management and decisions, these skills are more important, and the school leader cannot succeed without them. Hoy and Tarter (1995) observed that many school administrators fail to really consider the consequences of their strategic decisions. Therefore, “policy makers need to ensure that a number of conditions are in place such as providing school leaders with discretion over strategic direction setting and enhance their capacity to

develop school plans and goals aligned with broader national curriculum standards and responsive to local needs” (Beatriz, Deborah, & Hunter, 2008, p. 56). Management skills, rather than simply being required to achieve schools’ goals, enhance the confidence of principals and makes them more influential to others. Thus, in the era of the knowledge economy, this is associated with new skills, high performance and new added value. It is worth noting that in the context of global economic competition, the demand for skills not only in students but also in principals has increased. Skills were once a key lever for prosperity and fairness, but they are now increasingly becoming *the* key lever (Leitch, 2006).

### **7.3.2 Decision Making**

The data indicated that amongst the interviewed participants, eight school principals and four educational experts, principals believed that they were capable of decision making. Principals felt confident to make reasonable decisions with the support of experienced staff and that they could improve their skills in this area through continuing professional development. Saad commented:

*... I have the ability to make good decisions when I have the authority and required budgets as well as qualified staff that help me to make accurate decisions. However, I think that principals need continuous in-service training for developing the skill of decision making ... (Saad - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Principals also described, in various ways, their confidence in managing schools independently. Salah, who is a principal, put it this way:

*... I feel much more confident that school management is capable of making the right decisions. It is possible that not all decisions will be correct, but this is often*

*happening, but the opportunity to make the proper decisions through the school management will be great... (Salah - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Educational experts also expressed confidence in school principals' decision-making abilities, but they also viewed greater school autonomy as giving rise to various new challenges because principals will be more responsible:

*... I am sure that most principals have the ability to make decisions when they get more autonomy. They will face challenges, but this is part of their job. There is no doubt that the leader's personality has a role in decision making, but it is a skill that can develop ... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

It is also of note that some educational experts recognised that granting school principals greater autonomy would represent a means by which to improve their decision-making capabilities:

*...I feel that if school principals are empowered and given more confidence, this will contribute to enhancing their abilities in terms of making good decisions. Only, they need a chance... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

As these findings show, the majority of principals and educational experts had confidence in school leaders' abilities to make good decisions, but some of them link that to a need for advanced training and support from the Ministry of Education.

The present results are significant in two major respects. The first is that placing decision-making authority in the hands of school principals may address school, teacher and student needs and produce better outcomes. This is in agreement with Klein's (1999) argument that

the context in which the problem is posed is fundamental. Thus, school principals are close to the issues within their schools and this allows them to differentiate between available possibilities in an effective manner. The results are consistent with Eisenhardt's (1989) argument that the faster the decision-making process, the better. In addition, the opinion of Baum and Wally (2003) is that faster decision making has a positive impact on profitability and growth. However, in the centralised system, decision-making procedures take a long time. Thus, putting the decision-making power in the hands of school management will help to accelerate the process.

These results also seem to be consistent with Abu Al-Ula's (2003) research which found that the success of school management depends on the capability of the school's leader to make educational decisions, and that the correct decisions are made through the participation of others. Other evidence that is consistent with these results was mentioned earlier in the literature, where Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) and Klein (1999) argued that the context in which the problem occurs is fundamental. Thus, empowering principals and school management with appropriate decision-making power is better in terms of improving school performance.

Although, "much of the school improvement research finds that only a minority of schools know what changes to make to improve their results and suggests schools need to be provided with capacity building opportunities and support in order to achieve the aim of improved classroom practice" (Hamilton, 2015, p. 53), the results of this study appeared to support the idea of the confidence of principals to make appropriate decisions when they do assume responsibility for their schools. Furthermore, the very positions of principals make them the best individual to be in charge of decisions related to the school. Further support for these results, as mentioned in the literature review, was found in the work of Su et al. (2003), who

reported that school principals want to become principals in order to have a personally satisfying job and to provide effective leadership, and these two reasons were the most commonly stated as reasons for becoming a principal. In addition, school leaders are looking for effectiveness through their job, but some of them might continue to suffer from their experience of centralisation. Therefore, if the Ministry of Education were to place an increased amount of power in the hands of school leaders and move towards greater school autonomy, principals would have the power to make decisions but would be expected to use that power wisely in order to best serve their school's interests.

### **7.3.3 Teachers' Selection**

Eight school principals and three educational experts contended that principals should have the ability to select teachers for their schools. Further, they believed that giving school leaders the authority to appoint teachers will solve most of their problems. One of them said:

*... I believe that if the principal is granted the authority to appoint teachers and dismiss them, this will ensure about 90% of education operations would be successful. School principals will be looking for the most efficient teachers. This is a fabulous feature when it becomes one of school management authority... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Autonomous schools may open the way for competition in terms of attracting the best teachers because there are many approaches that can be placed in the hands of school leaders when they are granted greater autonomy:

*... the principal can manage the teacher selection process because they can identify qualified teachers and attract them to their schools. I can set some*

*advantages to attract effective teachers to leave their current positions and move to my school ... (Salim - semi-structured interviews-1).*

A collective decision is important in terms of key issues such as the selection of teachers, and should be made through specific rules rather than individual supposition, according to an educational expert:

*... principals can select teachers. However, I am against individual decisions, especially regarding main issues. It is better when the school has a board and all major decisions are made collectively. The selection should come through specific criteria and procedures... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The participants indicated the readiness of principals to select teachers and attract the most distinguished amongst available candidates. The results suggested managing schools collectively would be most advantageous, especially with regards to major issues such as selecting teachers. However, it emphasised the negative impact of individual decisions by the school principal in terms of appointing teachers and dismissing them.

Henry Mintzberg (1998) argued that service delivery in professional organisations such as education and health could never be better than the people delivering them. Whitaker (2003) also states that if you want to improve schools, hire better teachers and improve the teachers you have. Also, Arcia et al. (2011) argued that hiring and firing teachers and staff are indicators of school autonomy. However, the school principals in the central system do not have the power to select their teachers but they are responsible for their performance. In order to attract teachers, the school principals indicated the need for appropriate authority and budgets that would help them to offer such teachers appropriate benefits and features. For example, principals need to be able to set advantages to induce teachers to work at their

schools. Schools principals can attract teachers through such actions as improving school facilities, providing classrooms with new technologies and preparing specified facilities for teaching staff activities.

#### **7.3.4 Financial resources management**

Seven school principals and three educational experts expressed the view that principals would be able to manage financial resources, source alternative resources and obtain extra funding to support the school budget if they were granted greater autonomy.

School principals expressed their willingness to find additional resources for the school budget via association with the private sector; for example, Majed said:

*... for me, I can manage the budget and bring more funding to the school by forming partnerships with certain companies and community organisations. However, the task will not be the responsibility of the school principal alone, but the decision will be made by the school board... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Three school principals even suggested that the school buildings themselves could be a source of additional income, providing they were situated close to main roads. For example, this respondent explained:

*...increasing the school budget can be applied in the main cities, where the schools can get advantages from their facilities by renting some of them after school hours and at the weekend. Also, the schools' interfaces to the main streets*



*can be used for advertising by private companies... (Faisal - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another principal argued this point from a different angle, where he felt that donors could be attracted to support the school when it has good results and performance. Khalid commented:

*...I think that when the school principal is granted the required authority, he and his team can develop performance and students' results. So, this improvement can motivate donors and traders, especially rich parents, to support the school with funds and this will reflect on the futures of their children... (Khalid - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Shifting to the decentralisation of financial resources management, this may be a solution to the preventing considerable wastage of funds, as noted by an educational expert:

*...over the last decade, the government has spent a lot of money on education, and has allocated a considerable budget for the development of schools and teachers. However, there is no concrete development. I think that granting the school management the autonomy to manage financial resources in schools will help the government to reduce the education budget... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The data suggest that a lack of financial resources is one of the problems that faces schools. School principals appeared certain of their ability to manage financial resources in schools and bring in more funding when they have the ability to do so. This view was supported by the educational experts.

The findings suggest that managing financial resources in school autonomy can be achieved through two aspects; one for school authority over the use of the school budget, as well as the authority to seek additional funding from non-government sources (Arcia et al., 2011). It is also interesting to note that school facility investments are one of the main approaches that school principals can use to increase their funding. School leadership and management play a key role of effective use of resources (Abbott, Middlewood, & Robinson, 2015).

These results seem to be consistent with the research of Martorell, Stange, & McFarlin (2016) which found little evidence that the physical condition of public schools has an impact on student achievement. Thus, because of this impact, the school principals claim of being responsible for handling financial resources seems logical. Coelho (2009) argued that decentralisation opens opportunities for school financing through charitable and local business organisations.

The school principals claimed a lack of appropriate budget to provide their schools with their needs, as well as not having the authority to find other forms of funding from diverse sources. Here, there are several possible explanations for the failure of the Ministry of Education to invest the large budgets spent by the government in recent years. First, the failure of the Financial Management and Planning Department in the Ministry of Education to properly manage and distribute budgets. Second, the large gap between the decision makers in the top of the central system and the implementers. Third, the process of project implementation, whether developmental or new, requires the observance of various procedures which wastes finances and time because the decision maker at the top of the pyramid must be informed and take the necessary decisions with regards to each project, which increases the length of time it takes to implement them. Fourth, the Ministry of Education has been looking for large companies to construct education projects that can cover a country of 2.15 million km<sup>2</sup>. This

limits the available options and delays implementation, perhaps to the extent that the budget period is finished before implementation can actually occur. These developments include teacher training, establishing new schools, maintaining existing buildings and the provision of educational devices and supplies. All these actions depend on the decision-making process and the management system, which is centralised. It can thus be suggested that decentralisation will contribute significantly to overcoming the financial resource problems and increasing schools' funding. However, it can be argued that principals may use their authority to manage financial resources to meet their personal interests before those of their school. Therefore, such misuse should be avoided not only by setting appropriate rules and regulations but also by implementing a committed and effective system that will hold monitoring bodies and other key actors to account when they fail to control financial resources in schools (Maulid, 2017).

### **7.3.5 Performance evaluation**

To better understand the readiness to apply school autonomy, interviewees were asked of the principals' abilities to evaluate the performance of teachers when they have the authority to do so. Seven school principals and four educational experts argued that principals have the ability to assess teacher performance.

They believed that the existing framework for the evaluation of education appears to be operating ineffectively because there is no benefit derived from principals' evaluations and feedback, and indeed most of the reports being prepared are not considered when setting new plans. This view is explained via a comment by Nasir:

*...I expect that the best evaluator of performance within a school is its leader because he is the direct supervisor of the teachers and students and their*

*performance. I have full reports from the academic year, so at the end of the year, I can judge whether this teacher is qualified to continue and will perform well, or otherwise. I will know the strengths and weaknesses of the school... (Nasir - semi-structured interviews-1).*

School principals practice the evaluation process, but they felt that the assessments they currently offer are not deemed to be important; one principal said:

*... at present, both the school principals and the supervisors assess the performance of teachers. However, the Ministry of Education does not reward effective teachers and does not dismiss teachers who perform poorly, and the school leader does not have the authority to act. This means we perform the evaluation but it has no value... (Yosif - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The assessment of a school's performance by its principal is just one part of the entire evaluation process because external accountability must be complementary to assessing a school's performance; according to one of the educational experts:

*...I think that the evaluation process should be internal or self-evaluated by the school principal as well as external assessment which should implemented from outside the school, as based on specific criteria. Therefore, it is not possible to rely solely on the principal's evaluation of his work... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Together, these results provide important insights into the evaluation process in which the improvement of autonomous school performance would rely on internal evaluation via the school principals and external accountability via an external independent body.

The data suggest that shifting to decentralisation and granting schools greater authority will help to link the appraisal and feedback to rewards and teacher selection, which reflects on improving the performance of staff. Moreover, a qualified leader is one of the key requirements to properly achieve decentralisation (Halaq, 2012), such as the ability to self-assess. However, “in terms of school improvement, teachers and school leaders are the key change agents for improvement and self-evaluation is a necessary but insufficient ingredient to stimulate school improvement” (Chapman & Sammons, 2013, p. 2). Thus, improving education and achieving its goals requires both internal and external assessment, because the most successful education systems worldwide are those that have high levels of autonomy along with strong accountability (Benton, 2014).

Some of the issues that emerge from this finding that specifically relate to the centralised educational management system are: first, the performance evaluation and reports, either by supervisors or school leaders, should have an impact on teachers’ rewards, otherwise their performance will be reduced because “evaluation can play a key role in school improvement and teacher development” (OECD, 2007 in OECD, 2009, p. 139); second, centralisation of the evaluation process without the involvement of the school principal or rewarding effective teachers will not improve education. However:

*greater school autonomy can lead to more variation in practices as schools are able to choose and refine the practices that best suit their needs. Such variation, and its impact on performance, may need to be evaluated not only to ensure a positive impact on students and adherence to various policy and administrative requirements but also to learn more about effective practices for school improvement. This is particularly important in view of the greater variation in*

*outcomes and achievement among schools in some education systems than in others (ibid).*

### **7.3.6 Raising Student Achievement**

Seven school principals and four educational experts of those interviewed reported that school principals were able to improve students' results.

The participants linked the lack of student results to the educational central management system and the absence of support by the ministry of education. According to the interviewees, school principals should be able to resolve problems related to students' attainment when they have greater autonomy. For example, Nasir, a school principal, said:

*...the low level of student achievement is one of the key problems that I think about all the time, but I think I can fix it because I have many ideas to do just that. Only, I need more authority and support from the Ministry of Education... (Nasir - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Similarly, the interviewees made the point that centralisation is an obstacle to address the issues of students' achievement; however, they appeared confident that they would be able to overcome these difficulties when granted greater autonomy:

*...regarding student achievement and other student obstacles, we need a large enough budget and appropriate authority to help us to overcome these difficulties. In terms of school autonomy, I can collaborate with teachers and the school board to find solutions and increase students' results... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

With greater autonomy and the necessary budget, schools would best placed to improve students' results and update learning methods via hiring highly qualified teachers. In this regard, an educational expert said:

*...when applying school autonomy, I think the options for school principals will increase to improve students' results... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Another commented:

*...Nowadays, we cannot blame principals for the lack of students because they are not able to change teachers or add study labs... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Participants pointed out that there are elements related to improving student outcomes, such as teachers, school equipment and study laboratories, so to improve students' abilities these key elements should be developed.

Because a lack of student attainment is one of the key problems in schools, these results seem to be consistent with Alotaibi's (2013) study which found that the new authorities help school principals to improve their operations and solve school problems. It also further supports the idea argued by Hanson (1997) that autonomy can help lower managerial levels deal with their issues and problems within an appropriate timeframe (Hanson, 1997).

Additionally, these results are in line with those of previous a research project commissioned by the Western Australian Department of Education (2009), which aims to empower school communities by giving schools greater decision-making authority over key aspects of their operations such as staffing and budgets. Hattie (2013) from Melbourne University conducted

an independent evaluation of the programme. They found that Independent Public Schools (IPS) had been successful in creating the conditions for improved student performance. Furthermore, all school principals had the strong belief that they were able to influence their teachers to meet the high expectations they had for their students. In addition, Hamilton (2015) reported that giving principals greater autonomy effectively forces them to be responsible for improving student results:

*They frequently spoke of being 'in charge' of their schools; that they had the power to make a real difference to the achievement levels of the students and they felt responsible for the standards achieved in their school. They believed problems were theirs to solve, not someone else's, and so they acted as problem solvers when things were not going as they expected. They didn't run for cover when results were not achieved, they looked for new answers and then tested them out (p. 29).*

### **7.3.7 Curricula Development**

Six principals and only two educational experts who were interviewed reported that school principals would be able to manage the development of curricula. The key message that emerged from the data was that developing curricula is a complex task and school leaders need more training to qualify them to manage it. For example, Faisal, one of the principals, commented:

*...in the beginning of implementing school autonomy, it is difficult to manage curricula development because the process is complicated, but with professional training, principals can manage it as our role is only administrative... (Faisal - semi-structured interviews-1).*



Principals felt that they were being neglected and they have no voice, as well as teachers in developing curricula. Principals placed great emphasis on, and are extremely interested to be involved (with teachers) in the processes of building curricula. Majed said:

*at present, the principals and teachers are not involved in curriculum development, so we do not have experience. How can we suddenly be part of this complicated task? ... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Similarly, Khalid said:

*...when the school leader and teachers feel that they are part of this operation, they will take responsibility for that. Also, it is important for teachers to be part of curriculum building because there is a difference between what is imposed on you, and something you were involved in... (Khalid - semi-structured interviews-1).*

An educational expert was keen to point out that moving to decentralisation in terms of curricula development required a consideration of the ability of school principals in this regard. He thought that they are not ready for this step, as he explained:

*...shifting curricula development from the Ministry of Education to the school is inappropriate. I do not support this step because it needs specialists, but the school can be autonomous in managing other aspects such as teachers' affairs, building and budget... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

This result seems essential in order to ensure the principals' readiness with regards to developing curricula. There is evidence that the empowerment of teachers in implementing

curricula has a positive impact on the curricula so produced. Pietarinen, Soini and Pyhalto (2016) examined the 2014 curriculum renewal process, which was based on a top-down, bottom-up strategy, and they found that the process was successful because it facilitated meaningful collective sense-making, which affected the coherence of the curriculum. Another study in line with these results was that by Greany and Waterhouse (2016), which was conducted to describe and analyse the development of school autonomy, school leadership and curriculum innovation in England over the past four decades. They found that “leadership agency by principals and their professional teams is more important than policy/legal freedoms for securing curriculum innovation and such agency appears to depend on the capacity and confidence of leaders to shape an alternative and innovative curriculum in the face of structural constraints” (p. 1188).

The study sought to explore the extent to which principals believed they have the ability to manage schools independently in more depth. First and foremost, the school principals revealed considerable dissatisfaction with the extent of the authority they are currently granted. Several themes emerged regarding their ‘readiness’ for school autonomy and the abilities the principals offer. These themes exposed their abilities and some major skills, while also highlighting features of autonomy such as making decisions, building curricula, setting plans and goals, evaluating the performance of teachers, appointing teachers, managing budgets and solving problems. The results of this study provided considerable insight into the commitment of principals when they become so empowered. In this study, both school leaders and expert educators reported the desire to shift towards decentralisation. In addition, principals reported their need for training in some areas.

The most powerful findings that emerged from the data, both from the survey and the interviews, can be presented as follows. The general view amongst principals was that

empowering schools and shifting to decentralisation will facilitate the performance of their work and improve the performance of schools. Furthermore, there appeared to be a desire to shift to decentralisation and to have greater authority, rather than being administrative managers who effectively wait for orders from higher-level officials. Principals felt frustrated because of the neglect of many aspects such as decision making, selecting teachers and developing curricula. This frustration may reflect the fact that many of them would like to leave their positions as school leaders. These results seem to align with the neoliberal theory as based on individual freedom (Kotz, 2002), and the argument that to satisfy the need for self-actualisation, individuals should exercise their full capabilities (Hanson, 2003); also, the idea that the autonomous and self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to free choice (Gill & Scharff, 2011). In addition, this view is consistent with Maslow's theory of needs, as mentioned earlier in this study, that, for example, self-actualisation needs support the perception that autonomy and freedom have a positive influence on job satisfaction (AlKandari, 2013). Besides, the role of school principals has changed, and the traditional, top-down role of the principal as the sole leader is no longer viable in the 21st century (Kilinc, 2014).

The quality and efficiency of leadership have become key to the success of educational organisations. The demand to prepare schools leaders has increased because of their influence on educational operations. Moreover, "there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership" (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006, p. 5). In fact, there is a high impact of leadership on school performance that appears in pupils' results and their attitude towards study. Preparing a school for a new policy or a new programme should include, and indeed focus, on its leader. This required ensuring that the school leader is ready in terms of

clarity of objectives, sufficient training, passion and dedication to work. The situation in terms of school autonomy will be different because school principals will play an essential role in the failure or success of the school. With school autonomy, the leader has greater authority and freedom to make decisions and change plans. Thus, this study aims to investigate the capability of principals to lead schools autonomously. In order to recognise their ability, they were asked about some key skills in order to understand their perspectives.

These findings may help us to understand principals' readiness and capability to lead schools autonomously through issues such as managing financial resources, evaluating the performance, solving problems and setting plans and goals. Thus, this a strong indicator by which to encourage officials to take steps toward decentralisation. However, the results suggested that principals need further training to facilitate the performance of their jobs and to improve the quality of their performance in developing curricula, for example.

Although the qualitative study, via semi-structured interviews, was conducted in two cities in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh and Sabya with a preference for Riyadh in terms of schools' buildings, transportation to schools and Internet services, the results showed no differences between principals' responses in the two cities regarding their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making, motivation towards school autonomy and their perceptions of the opportunities that may arise with greater school autonomy in relation to decision making.

**RQ3: What are school principals' perceptions of the opportunities that may arise with greater school autonomy in relation to decision making?**

This section answers RQ3 in two parts, beginning with the quantitative results, and followed by the qualitative results, from interviews with school principals and educational experts. The quantitative results represent the implication of granting the school management greater autonomy through six points, as per Table (7.6). The qualitative results also present the results of this issue and focus on three themes; student results, school environments and teacher performance.

## **7.4 Quantitative Results**

### **7.4.1 Male principals' perceptions of the impact of granting schools greater autonomy.**

The survey sought to explore male and female principals' perceptions of the impact of granting schools greater autonomy. Knowing the influence of autonomy on students' creativity and results and teaching development, are key aspects of school performance, for when the schools become autonomous, they are likely to improve. Thus, the responses to these questions provide a clear indication of the positive impact of granting schools greater autonomy. The associated results are reported in Table (7.11).

*Table 7.11: Male principals' perceptions of the impact of granting schools greater autonomy.*

The implication of granting the school management more authority	Agree		Disagree	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
The existence of sanctions and incentives will contribute to creating an atmosphere of creativity and competition	91	96.8%	3	3.2%
Managing the maintenance of school buildings by school management will make the environment more attractive	89	94.7%	5	5.3%
Granting schools more authority will raise the sense of responsibility	90	95.7%	4	4.3%
Teachers' participation in the development of the curriculum will contribute to enrich and increase interaction in teaching	88	93.6%	6	6.4%
Granting principals greater autonomy will give them more confidence, which contributes to improving school performance	88	93.6%	6	6.4%
Granting school greater authority will contribute to improving students' results	74	78.7%	20	21.3%

As shown in Table (7.11), almost all male school principals felt that granting schools greater autonomy and applying sanctions and incentives would contribute to creating an atmosphere of creativity and competition; however, three (3.2%) individuals did not agree with this perception. Overall, the majority of those surveyed agreed that giving schools greater autonomy would make the environment more attractive, raise the sense of responsibility and increase interaction in teaching. However, 20 (21.3%) still felt that autonomy would not improve students' results.

#### **7.4.2 Female principals' perceptions of the impact of granting schools greater autonomy.**

On the other hand, all female principals (100.0%) as shown in Table (7.12) felt that the existence of sanctions and incentives would contribute to creating an atmosphere of creativity and competition. In addition, they believed that managing the maintenance of school buildings by school management would make the environment more attractive. Overall, the

perceptions of male and female of the impact of granting schools greater autonomy were similar. They were both less confident about the impact of granting schools greater authority on improving students' results by 78.7% for male and 69.2% for female principals.

*Table 7.12: Female principals' perceptions of the impact of granting schools greater autonomy.*

The implication of granting the school management more authority	Agree		Disagree	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
The existence of sanctions and incentives will contribute to creating an atmosphere of creativity and competition	52	100.0%	0	0.0%
Managing the maintenance of school buildings by school management will make the environment more attractive	52	100.0%	0	0.0%
Granting schools more authority will raise the sense of responsibility	47	90.4%	5	9.6%
Teachers' participation in the development of the curriculum will contribute to enrich and increase interaction in teaching	48	92.3%	4	7.7%
Granting principals greater autonomy will give them more confidence, which contributes to improving school performance	48	92.3%	4	7.7%
Granting school greater authority will contribute to improving students' results	36	69.2%	16	30.8%

What is interesting in these data is that female principals were slightly more positive than male principals about the impact of sanctions and incentives on creating an atmosphere of creativity and competition in schools. A possible explanation for this might be that females are more disciplined in their work as "Saudi women have consistently shown grit toward their employment and career amidst various challenges such as limiting culture, deeply embedded traditions, and related obstacles" (Varshney, 2019, p. 359). The preference for female performance was also reported by Jamil et al. (2012), who revealed that female institutional heads have proven, comparatively speaking, to be better administrators, showing a keen interest in institutional administration, motivating their team, and maintaining a good

relationship with staff and parents. Thus, people who perform well in their work are not afraid of sanctions but do expect incentives.

In addition, from the tables, it can be seen that female principals were slightly more positive than male principals about the impact of granting the school management greater authority to manage the maintenance of school buildings on making the environment more attractive. This result could be linked to the results in Q2 about the readiness of school principals to become more autonomous in relation to decision making, in which female principals appeared slightly more confident than male principals in their ability to manage schools and show their planning skills. This again confirms the perceived capability of female principals to manage various aspects of schools, including the maintenance of school buildings. These results are likely to be related to Saudi women's general desire to demonstrate their ability to occupy high management positions (Alsuwaida, 2016), including that of educational leadership. This desire is a reflection of the gradual and increasing shift from previously low levels of women in high leadership positions; as reported by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Oman), only 1% of women hold top management positions (Sperling, Marcati, & Rennie, 2014).

Taking both sets of results together, these findings are consistent with those of Hamilton (2015) in the sense that autonomy allows school principals, teachers and students to use their abilities better and make them feel free to perform their own actions. In addition, Paletta (2014) found that granting schools greater autonomy could significantly improve student attainment. Higham and Earley (2013) showed that greater autonomy increases school performance. Furthermore, Patrinos and Fasih (2009) argued that granting schools greater autonomy increases the options available to parents.



## 7.5 Qualitative Results

The results from the interviews revealed that granting schools greater autonomy will positively affect students' results, as well as improving the school environment and teachers' performances. In this section, the main themes emerging from the analysis of qualitative data relating to RQ3 "what are their school principals' perceptions of the opportunities that may arise when becoming more autonomous?" will be presented.

### 7.5.1 Motivations towards school autonomy

The overall response was very positive; all school principals and four educational experts who were interviewed revealed that granting school management greater autonomy would help principals to perform their job properly and contribute to a significant and positive change in schools. Some examples of their attitudes are given below, however, most of the data exposed the motivation and optimism of participants toward shifting to decentralisation and giving schools greater autonomy. One comment by a principal was that:

*... I am so optimistic about the implementation of the school autonomy model, and the education will move to an excellent level because this policy has succeeded in other countries, if we start well, the results will be positive... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another comment by an educational expert:

*...decentralisation is the right decision to solve many educational problems, and will give school principals the opportunity to contribute to finding solutions with great effectiveness... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

One participant confirmed his support for the idea, and pointed out that an appropriately qualified leader is a key factor of an autonomous school:

*... I expect the success of the approach, especially if it starts in some schools that have qualified leaders who appear to be ready for such. I think when the idea has succeeded and become acceptable in society and among students in participating schools, this will encourage other schools to be autonomous... (Saad - semi-structured interviews-1).*

A similar opinion of an educational expert was that autonomous schools will represent a huge step in education development; however, he linked the associated success to the method of implementation:

*...the concept of autonomous schools, I think is wonderful, but the success or failure of this idea depends on the implementation, we have many experiments that have been applied in schools that did not work and the reason for which is the means of application... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Participants supported the notion of school autonomy; whilst some of them anticipate its complete success, most linked its success to certain requirements. What was common across the interviews that each of the principals had a strong sense of autonomy. They frequently point out that autonomy would make a real difference to student achievement because it will allow decision makers to resolve their school's challenges without the need for reference to higher authority.

### 7.5.2 Improving student achievement

Student achievement, including skills obtained at school, represent the main target of education. The school's measures cannot be considered successful by achieving awards, providing an attractive environment or having efficient teachers and modern curricula, but through students' achievements and the skills they acquire. Thus, participants were asked their perceptions of the impact of school autonomy on improving student results. All school principals and four educational experts reported that granting schools greater autonomy would improve student outcomes. A school principal indicated the relationship between the authority underlying decision making and the ability to improve student results:

*...I think when the school principal has the authority to select the teachers and develop the school building, facilities and equipment, the students' results will be improved. Also, the principals with authority can select excellent teachers which will affect the students' achievement... (Salah - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Statements from principals explained how improving education factors in an autonomous school such as curricula, activities and environment would affect students' results:

*... school autonomy will open the opportunity for the school's management to plan and develop their activities according to the students' needs. Also, the school environment and curriculum will be developed, and the school will be more attractive. All of these will positively affect student achievement and innovation.... (Faisal - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The participant's comment clearly shows strong, positive attitudes regarding the impact of implementation of school autonomy on student outcomes. They argued that the empowerment of teachers and students in the decision-making process will encourage them to be more effective, which improve students' results. In this regard, Sami said:

*...I think, when the teachers, the students, as well as the school principal contribute to building the curriculum, applying appropriate teaching methods and attractive activities and being involved with decisions will motivate them to reach the associated goals, of which the most important is improving the students' results... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

From the interview data, it appeared that the current methods of teaching are not commensurate with the manner in which education is developing worldwide. They believed that shifting to decentralisation may help to improve the current approach to teaching. The interviewees indicated that the centralised system prevents schools from trying new teaching strategies, but with more autonomy schools could practice modern approaches. An educational expert commented:

*...unfortunately, teaching in most schools is indoctrination, and most teachers and supervisors are focussing on finishing the curriculum in the traditional way, without innovation. I think the main reason for this is the central system, because schools and teachers do not have the authority to make any changes... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Overall respondents were confident that granting schools greater autonomy in terms of selecting teachers and improving facilities and developing curricula will contribute to improving students' results. A similar result was found by Al-Muhailbi et al. (2016), who

investigated the viewpoint of male and female school principals regarding decentralisation and its implementation in Kuwait. They found that most school principals had a good understanding of school autonomy, especially in areas of student achievement and professional development of teachers. In addition, Hanushek et al. (2013) contended that local autonomy has a major influence on student achievement, but this influence varies systematically across countries, depending on the level of educational and economic development.

Empowerment, as an individual's psychological state, is evident through four concepts: meaning, capability, autonomy and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). Empowering school principals, teachers and students to promote their own values makes them use their capabilities, because they feel that they have the choice to perform their own actions in order to achieve the strategic goals of education (Hamilton, 2015). Clearly, autonomous leadership is a better choice for effective learning and activities because school management will be able to add additional values and extra approaches.

*Performance standards are typically associated with accountability systems. Over the past decade, accountability systems based on student performance have become more common in many OECD countries, and results are often widely reported and used in public debate to inform parents about school choice and to prompt improvements in schools. The rationale for and nature of these accountability systems, however, vary greatly within and across countries. The OECD countries use different forms of external assessment, external evaluation or inspection, and schools' own quality-assurance and self-evaluation efforts (OECD, 2010, p. 76).*

There was clear evidence from the literature that was consistent with the results of this study, in particular from Paletta (2014) who investigated the influence of school autonomy on student achievement, showing that granting greater autonomy to schools could improve pupil achievement. He indicated that there is a growing body of research linking school autonomy and performance which should lead to the effects of school autonomy on the performance of principals, teachers and staff, as well as the associated impact on student achievement being measurable, the latter representing the fundamental goal of the education process.

### **7.5.3 Improving Teachers' Performance**

The study yielded another significant result via all school principals and educational experts amongst those interviewed. They felt that shifting to decentralisation and applying school autonomy would contribute to improving teachers' performances. They pointed out that the reason for the low performance of teachers is that they currently know that the decision to dismiss them can only be made by the Ministry of Education and that their principal had no authority to address this matter themselves. However, when the school is independent, their performance will change for the better. Their perspective appears in this comment:

*...I think when the school leader has the authority and the teachers know that the decision is in the hands of the school, their performance will improve because it does not, they will be dismissed... (Khalid - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another statement by Salman:

*...If the teachers knew that the principal is responsible for their assessment and has the authority to keep them or dismiss them, as well as reward them, based*

*on their performance, they will certainly work harder and do their best... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The autonomous school can overcome the challenges that face the principal in state schools in terms of teacher training courses. For example, in state schools, when the principal assesses the teacher and identifies their needs, he cannot provide them with what they need in terms of training. However, in an autonomous school, the principal would be able to address this issue, according to an educational expert:

*...there is a problem in providing teachers with the training courses they need, because each teacher has certain shortcomings that are different from other teachers. Currently, the principal cannot include the teacher in specific programmes because the programmes are planned by the Ministry of Education based on a general evaluation... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Overall, the data collected in this study suggests that shifting authority to the school management will lead to certain advantages that will positively affect teacher performance. First, the assessment of teachers' work will be their principal's responsibility. Second, incentives, sanctions, retention and dismissal of teachers will be a general part of school management decisions. These two factors will make teachers more serious in terms of their performance and developing their abilities to avoid being dismissed by the principal. In addition, teachers' contributions to curriculum design and implementation will increase their motivation toward creativity in teaching, as well as making them far more willing to achieve the goals required by the curriculum. The responses justify the idea that the increase in efficiency when principals have more authority to appoint and dismiss teachers, because

when teachers realise that the first criterion for employment is efficiency, this will encourage them to improve their abilities, skills and performance.

The teacher is an essential pillar of the school community who can have a significant impact on student achievement and character, either negative or positive. The ability to appoint and dismiss teachers may become a challenge for principals, especially at the start of implementation. However, the majority of school principals appeared secure in their ability to select teachers and dismiss them because they confirmed that the quality of some current teachers falls below the required standard; school management is unable to replace them, not because they do not have the solution, but because they do not currently have the authority to make such a decision. This result reflects the extent of the problems arising from this matter and the principals' inability to deal with it. It illustrates the current complete failure to resolve this problem.

There was clear evidence from the literature that was consistent with the results of this study in the sense that empowering schools and giving them greater autonomy helps improve teachers' performances. For example, a study in England by Higham and Earley (2013) showed that governors and principals have similar opinions concerning the possible increase in performance resulting from greater autonomy. In addition, Patrinos and Fasih (2009) argued that granting schools greater autonomy should not only expands the choices available to parents, but also push schools to improve their performance. Skills and knowledge are important for improving teacher performance; however, in an autonomous school, principals can improve the motivation of teachers, which leads to practice development (Finnigan, 2012). Despite the limited authority granted to school academies, such as staff management, a taught curriculum, length of the school day and other aspects of their day-to-day



functioning, the effect this had on the attainment shown by students was obvious (Machin & Silva, 2013).

#### **7.5.4 Improving the school environment**

The school environment, building, facilities and sports areas are fundamental to the school. School buildings should be designed to serve educational purposes and promote learning. The state schools in Saudi Arabia have similar designs across the country. Most interviewees (as mentioned in Chapter six) appeared dissatisfied with the current buildings in terms of design and their lack of facilities for sports and other, different activities. The interviews investigated the potential impact of implementing school autonomy on improving the school environment.

Almost all interviewees, nine amongst the school principals and educational experts felt that granting schools greater autonomy would contribute to improved school environments. The results demonstrated that school principals are ready to contribute to the improvement of the school environment and associated facilities because granting them more authority to manage the school budget will give them the chance to improve the school environment. In addition, building partnerships with community organisations will help to develop schools because the community partnership is an essential part of developing education in many countries around the world. A statement by a school principal was as follows:

*...the school principal can develop the school facilities when they have sufficient budget, as well as making the school more attractive. Also, we can build partnerships with external parties to develop the schools' facilities... (Saad - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Similarly, another school principal commented:

*... there are many companies and donors that seek to support schools, but we cannot contact them. They want to contribute and help to develop the education sector, but we do not have the authority to build relationships with them... (Salim - semi-structured interviews-1).*

An educational expert indicated the importance of assigning responsibility for managing the school budget to the principal to help him to act quickly to repair what must be repaired:

*...when the school budget is under the control of school management, I think this will help to improve the school environment fix urgent matters because I can make the decision quickly to achieve the needs of the school... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

School principals were not entirely satisfied with existing buildings; they complained about the lack of good environments, and the current unattractive environments, in schools. They requested that the design of the physical environment of schools should be rethought and that this should take place before the implementation of school autonomy. The development of school environment facilitates should improve learning for both teachers and students. Nowadays, there is no diversity in school buildings, but the Saudi government is still constructing schools using similar designs. This problem represents one of two main problems of school buildings, while the other is that rental schools do not serve education's purposes.

Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant difference between the responses of principals working in each of the two cities, Riyadh and Sabya, regarding the opportunities that may arise with greater school autonomy in relation to decision making.

## 7.6 Conclusion

To summarise, the aim of this study was to explore the possibility of shifting to decentralisation and transitioning to a school system that would grant school management the authority to make decisions in an independent manner. Because of the key role that school principals would play in such change, this study considered the capability of school leaders to implement this task. Through the questionnaire and interviews, the readiness of the school principal has been investigated. The results indicated that principals are ready to lead schools independently. The majority of them appear to strongly support decentralisation and, as a consequence, would expect a positive impact on educational standards. They believed that school principals could lead their schools independently within the country. However, some of them emphasised the importance of providing appropriate training for the principals taking part in the reform.

This chapter has presented data related to RQ2: “what are school principals’ perceptions of their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making?” and RQ3: “what are school principals’ perceptions of the opportunities that may arise with greater school autonomy in relation to decision making?”. These findings suggested that, in general, school principals are ready for greater autonomy in schools. One of the most significant findings to emerge in relation to RQ3 was that both school principals and educational experts reported that granting schools greater autonomy will provide opportunities to improve school performance and educational outcomes for pupils. The next chapter will answer RQ4 regarding the challenges of implementing school autonomy according to school principals’ perceptions.

## **Chapter 8: Data analysis and discussion (3)**

**RQ4: What are school principals' perceptions of the challenges they may face when implementing school autonomy in relation to decision making and accountability?**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted with principals and education experts. This chapter will answer RQ4 and focus on school principals' perceptions of the challenges they may face when becoming more autonomous. The data revealed a number of challenges, which are: design of school buildings; school facilities; job security; misuse of authority; the internal resistance to change; external resistance to change; qualified leaders; and the current use of rented buildings. The results of the principals' interviews will be presented first, followed by the results of interviews with educational experts.

### **8.2 School buildings**

#### **8.2.1 Design**

Eight school principals and four educational experts reported that the design of school buildings is a key challenge to implementing school autonomy. Participants explained this issue in different ways, for example, one principal linked his success to the suitability of the school environment in relation to the current buildings' design:

*...the work environment is so important for school principal success as well as for teachers and students. However, the current buildings are inappropriate for autonomy in terms of their design... (Nasir - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another pointed out that a large proportion of state schools were designed with several floors and little space, which makes monitoring students more difficult:

*...overseeing students, in a four-storey building, is extremely difficult and impractical. The administration staff members are responsible for inspection the whole floors, and they are required to move between them regularly... (Saad - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The current school buildings need more development to be fully appropriate for modern methods of teaching and the diverse activities this entails. Responding to new thinking quickly and efficiently needs school buildings to be designed in a flexible manner:

*... a key challenge to autonomy is the school buildings. The state schools will not help the principal to develop teaching approaches and student activities. The school building must be comprehensive, so there is a need to rethink the school building design ... (Salah - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The current design is traditional, and there has been little or no innovation in this regard over the last few decades; thus, no real changes have been made to their design, as expressed by a school principal:

*...the current design of the schools is almost the same around the country. There is no innovation or even attempts at such. This design has been used for decades. It needs more changes... (Salim - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Commentary from an educational expert that facilitation and attraction are two features of the school building which do not currently exist:

*... the well-designed building must make learning easier and effective for students and teachers. The school building also should attract all staff and pupils... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Another comment reported that green grounds and safety are fundamental to school buildings. An educational expert said:

*... the current school building needs, planting trees in the school grounds, this part of the school design. Green spaces are very important to the students' health and atmosphere. Grounds must be safe and secure for children. All these matters should be considered ... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The results of this study show the link between school design and performance. Current state schools would be perfectly reasonable – but not optimal – for the adoption of the notion of school autonomy. This means that any new design of school buildings should be planned with a view to future educational needs. Woolner (2010) explained the extent to which the school environment has an impact on learners:

*Instinctively, people tend to feel that a poor physical environment will have a detrimental effect on the activities that take place there, and that therefore a badly maintained or poorly designed school must have an impact on learning. Indeed, it seems obvious that in a rundown school, staff and students will tend to feel less valued and motivated, leading to more absence from school, poor behaviour and ultimately lower academic achievement. We can probably all think of schools we have come across that fit this description, at least partially (p. 15).*

Together, these results provide important insights as to why current school buildings have been identified as an obstacle to applying school autonomy. Thus, the design of any new school buildings needs to reflect the transition towards autonomy and the development of teaching methods, because the current schools do not fully meet the purposes of education. School buildings and grounds must be designed to promote learning because student achievement can be affected – either positively or negatively – by the school environment.

The interactions and behaviour of students are also often determined by the learning environment (Odeh, Oguche, & Ivagher, 2015). Furthermore, the learning environment plays a fundamental role in determining how students perform or respond to circumstances and situations around them (Tsavga, 2011). In addition, Akoja (2006) argued that learning, as a process, is related to changes in behaviour as a reflection of practice, experience, insight, or motivations in the environment. Here, we can see how important the learning environment is to shape and develop the students' behaviour and influence their attitude toward education. The main object of autonomy is to improve the performance of the school and the students' results as facilitated by an attractive learning environment. However, the lack of readiness of current school buildings and facilities will make school principals' work more difficult in this

regard. Thus, shifting to decentralisation may cause more difficulties for the school unless appropriate preparations are made in advance.

The results related to school building design can be discussed from three perspectives: first, in terms of the link between school principal's success in achieving the school's goals and having a good school design. A high-quality school design helps the principal to develop educational activities and make the school environment more attractive for both teachers and students. Students and teachers play an active role in interacting with their environment, rather than being passively acted upon (Gifford, 2007); second, regarding teachers, a modern school design would facilitate the application of new teaching approaches, making learning easier and more effective, and also allow teachers to be more productive. Also, well-designed school buildings help teachers to oversee pupils' behaviour between classes; third, for students, a good design opens an increased number of opportunities for them to practice diverse activities both during the school day and in the evening, whilst also making the school a safe and secure environment for them. Finally, a suitable and comprehensive design will make the school a more attractive environment for the principal, staff, teachers and students, and create a suitable atmosphere for creativity. All these perceptions on the part of the participants clearly indicate the importance of school building design as a vital factor in the successful implementation of school autonomy, and would open the way for increased dialogue and review of the design of existing buildings.

### **8.2.2 Facilities**

Seven school principals and four of the educational experts made their dissatisfaction with current school facilities apparent. Some principals, when interviewed, thought that they did not want to lead the school autonomously until the school buildings had been modernised to



help them to achieve more worthwhile results. For example, when one was asked what the challenges that principals may face when implementing school autonomy, the given reply was:

*... school construction nowadays needs to be maintained, improved and be given additional facilities. When the school become autonomous, how school principals will be able to run the required activities with the current lack of facilities. The government should prepare new schools for such a new policy... (Salim - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The principals interviewed did not wish to lead autonomous schools unless all facilities were appropriately updated. One explained how:

*... as an independent school principal, I will not accept to be a principal if the facilities of the school are incomplete, if the Ministry of Education equipped the school building with various facilities such as laboratories and sports venues in a modern style, this will facilitate my work as the principal of an autonomous school ... (Yosif - semi-structured interviews-1).*

From the interview data, there appeared to be a need for modern facilities to help principals to make the decisions that would achieve the objectives of school autonomy. An educational expert commented:

*...the ideal building needs more facilities for activities and information recourses and modern technology for practising. Providing a school all these requirements will facilitate the decision-making process for the principal regarding the application of new strategies for teaching, learning and training teachers.*

*Therefore, the implementation of school autonomy will face challenges because the current buildings are lacking appropriate facilities ... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

These findings reflect the importance of school buildings and facilities on several issues. First, an 'ideal' building and modern facilities would help the principal to accomplish the school's aims and improve student achievement. Second, some participants pointed out that the extensive opportunities for the autonomous school to find additional sources of income in addition to government funding will arise from the existence of distinctive facilities that can be rented out of school hours. Hence, it is important that these facilities are modern, unique and attractive to such investment. For example, in many rural regions, the only existing social resource is the local school, and using it as a resource for the community can help other partners such as health, social care and sport to run community-based activities.

Here, we can highlight the importance of the results which give a clear message of the need to improve facilities in schools. First, the impact of developing facilities on student achievement. Earthman, Cash and van Berkum (1996) found that 11th-grade pupils in the above standard school buildings scored higher as measured by the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills than did their counterparts attending class in substandard facilities. Moore and Warner (1998) found a major impact on student achievement after the facilities in these Syracuse schools had been refurbished, the most important of which was the improvement in maths scores of sixth-grade pupils. In addition, natural lighting and increased ventilation created learning environments that were more conducive to student academic achievement and the health of building's occupants in general (Leary, 2003). Attractive, well-maintained

and well-designed facilities contribute to creating a positive atmosphere, productive learning and proper discipline within the school (Schneider, 2002).

Second is the influence of improved facilities on teacher performance. Sanoff (1996) argued that teaching strategies designed by staff should be taken into consideration by school architects when determining the plan for new or renovated facilities. Also, Schneider (2003) reported that teachers agree that the facilities in which they teach can be detrimental to the quality of their teaching if the physical environment is substandard. Improving facilities can motivate community members to participate in the educational process, support school initiatives and use the building in general due to its welcoming design (Deal & Peterson, 1999).

Third, good school facilities can be used for cultural events which might include ethnic and community festivals, art shows, theatre performances, and other activities that support, celebrate, and enhance a community's cultural assets (Bingler, Quinn, & Sullivan, 2003).

### **8.2.3 Rental schools**

Only three school principals and three educational experts reported that rental schools are not suitable for the implementation of school autonomy. The number of participants amongst the principals who pointed out that rented schools did not fit the idea of school autonomy was limited; nevertheless, these findings are very important. The reason for the small number of participants who discussed this issue was that it was only rental school principals who referred to this issue, with the other participants being in buildings that had been built by the government; they did not consider, or have reasonably knowledge of, the disadvantages of the use of rental buildings.

The rental buildings, as established for non-education purposes, cause difficulties in their attempt to serve the goals of education. According to a school principal:

*...I think that the rental school is a key challenge of achieving the education goals. The problems of rental schools such as floors, poorly ventilated that affect the health of students, lack of facilities for student activities as well as some very tight classrooms which are not suitable for teaching, all these complications make our job hard. It is unreasonable to discuss school autonomy in these circumstances... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Even if principals of rental schools felt positively about, and supported the notion of, shifting to decentralisation and applying school autonomy, they stated that their schools are currently inadequate to meet the associated needs. They made their inability to lead schools autonomously apparent, as a result of the many disadvantages associated with their buildings:

*...I do not think that rental schools fit the notion of school autonomy. The disadvantages of rental schools are their location, where they are sometimes located on main roads, or close to, and this affects the safety of the students, as well as there are often no spaces around the rental school building for adding additional facilities. These shortcomings will face the principals and they have to be resolved... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

One expert pointed out that the disadvantages of rental schools were numerous and could not be limited, so they were not suitable for autonomous schools:

*...there are many drawbacks, in rented buildings, so in any case, the rented school cannot be suitable for the idea of school autonomy ... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Small details of the school building such as colouring and spaces for playing and walking, have become important in the school building, all of which are lacking in rental schools according to an educational expert:

*...the internal spaces, the colouring and the material, all these details are not considered in rental buildings, so if the Ministry of Education decides to apply autonomous schools, the rental schools should be permanently excluded, because they do not meet the specifications of educational buildings... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

These findings suggested that rental schools are seen as inappropriate for school autonomy because it is not simple or easy for principals to achieve the school vision and goals within such environments. The physical environment of school buildings plays a key role in student attainment. Therefore, it appeared that the rental schools are not sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of greater autonomy because the buildings will make decision making more difficult for principals.

Through the significant findings apparent in the case of rented schools, the disadvantages can be summarised as follows: the building has many floors and poorly ventilated; lack of facilities and spaces as well as small classrooms; unsuitable locations that cause risk to students when coming and leaving the schools. In a word, these rented schools do not meet the requirements of educational buildings.

In the international seminar “Improving the Quality of Educational Building” in Austria in 1998, research revealed that the quality of facilities has an influence not only on educational outcomes but also on the well-being of students and teachers. There is almost complete agreement that educational facilities play an important part in shaping attitudes toward the environment and contribute to educational development (Hinum, 1999). Thus, it can be argued that the success of autonomous schools under difficult circumstances is unlikely.

There is a study that provides good evidence of the above. This study, by OECD Development Centre (2004), explored the impact of decentralisation in developing countries, finding that in an environment where the central state is not fulfilling its basic functions, decentralisation could be counterproductive (Jutting et al., 2004). Of course, Saudi Arabia is not a poor country, but the situation relating to the rental schools is that they do not have basic facilities, and therefore they cannot meet the essential education functions. Thus, granting rental schools greater autonomy may actually be counterproductive.

If there is dissatisfaction with existing state school buildings, then it is certain that the rented buildings are not suitable for the development of the educational process and does not meet the basic standards of safety demands (Algarni & Male, 2014). The “residential buildings are rented to function as schools, but the size of the classrooms may not be comfortable for a large number of pupils/students, or helpful for teachers to implement various strategies that may necessitate learners moving around the classroom” (Algarni & Male, 2014, p. 49). Thus, it is impossible to apply school autonomy in rented schools because of their inadequacy in terms of their lack safety facilities such as emergency exits, and the lack of learning resources such as libraries or ICT laboratories (ibid).

This study reported that school buildings represented a particular challenge to the implementation of school autonomy. The results reflect the continuing problem that the Saudi government is still constructing new schools to the same design as the old model, which may cause problems for the coming generations as it does not help to improve education or the school environment in general. From the respondents' points of view, this is essential and, indeed, priority matter in making schools more attractive, which includes the addition of various facilities for learning and different activities in schools. The existing school building design usually includes a number of floors that makes it a struggle for both teachers and students alike to move around. This design might be suitable at the secondary level, but not so for primary schools. Most participants suggested changing the current design of school buildings in order to better achieve educational purposes.

### **8.3 Job Security**

Seven school principals and four educational experts revealed that shifting to decentralisation will put decision-making power in the hand of school principals, which may thereby reduce job security amongst teachers. There were different perspectives on this issue. For example, one principal, when talking about the expected challenges that might be faced in the implementation of school autonomy, said:

*...Job security will be a challenge in the decentral system, and this may affect performance negatively or positively. For example, if the teacher feels threatened, he will try to improve his performance... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

An opposite point of view is that job security will not be a key challenge to the implementation of school autonomy, but based on the personality and performance of teachers and staff, according to one school principal:

*...for job security in autonomous schools, I do not expect this to cause a problem for qualified teachers and staff but may potentially be a threat to poorly performing teachers. Also, there is a general tendency from the government to privatise some sectors ... (Yosif - semi-structured interviews-1).*

A similar perception was given by an educational expert who felt that that shifting to decentralisation would have a negative impact on the job security of teachers, as transferring decision making to the school, alongside a greater authority to appoint and dismiss teachers, will represent a clear threat to them:

*...I think the employment might be the actual problem, people would consider autonomous schools to be like private schools. The real and common concern of Saudi teachers is job security. It will be difficult to attract teachers with excellent skills and experience because of the absence of job security unless the school has other special advantages... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

From another perspective, an educational expert reported that the advantage of job security does not exist in the private sector, so school autonomy should be the same:

*...Job stability is often indicated as a key advantage of the public sector, which is relatively stable. The state sector organisations such as schools have the stability of government funding. Also, decisions can only be made by the Ministry of*



*Education but moving to decentralisation will mean the principal of an autonomous school able to make the decisions such as in the private sector which leads to a loss of job security... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

It is clear that there is no agreement about the impact of applying school autonomy on job security. Data revealed two perceptions, in which principals felt that this issue was based on the teachers themselves, while educational experts felt that this change will have a negative effect on job security. The possible explanation for these results is that placing the responsibility for such decision making in the hands of principals will result in an increased turnover of teachers in schools, and thus cause job insecurity. This finding is broadly corroborated by the work of Faremi (2017), which revealed a significant relationship between teacher retention strategies and job security in private secondary schools in Osun state. His study also showed a significant relationship between teacher turnover and job security in schools.

*Job security is one's expectation about continuity in a job situation. It has to do with employee feelings over loss of job or loss of desirable job features such as lack of promotion opportunities, current working conditions, as well as long-term career opportunities. (Faremi, 2017, p. 283).*

In the current situation in Saudi schools, teachers and all educational staff have good job security, even though their performance and effectiveness might be less than might otherwise be expected. Thus, when granting schools greater autonomy, job insecurity can be argued in two ways. First, as a strength, in which teachers realise that inadequate performance can result in them being dismissed and replaced by a more efficient person. As a result, this will encourage teachers to work harder and improve their skills merely in order to maintain their

positions. On the other hand, it is hard to attract teachers to autonomous schools when job security is poor. In addition, the importance of job security is significantly related to commitment and satisfaction (Artz & Kaya, 2014); therefore, its absence may affect teacher performance.

However, in order to overcome the difficulty in attracting teachers who have excellent skills and practical experience to work in autonomous schools in the absence of job safety, autonomous schools can be distinguished from public schools through offering incentives and rewards for excellent and efficient teachers. Currently, all teachers in government schools are the same in terms of the incentives and rewards they are offered, even principals and supervisors, in that they earn the same wages and bonuses. Certainly, this results in frustration for those who work hard and genuinely attempt to improve their performance. Furthermore, the absence of authority or any sanctions for poor performance makes principals' task more difficult to deal with.

#### **8.4 Misuse of Authority**

Six of the principals and three educational experts amongst those interviewed reported that applying school autonomy may result in a misuse of authority by principals when it is granted. It is worth discussing this matter in detail because of its particular implications when it occurs. A school principal commented:

*... the authority may be misused, but if there are criteria for choosing them. Appointing school leaders needs to be through their academic record and the most efficient and qualified candidates... (Faisal - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another comment by a school principal:

*...I cannot deny that personal and human relations may play a fundamental role and influence decision making by principals... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Granting school principals more authority may allow them to exploit it to their personal advantage. An educational expert said:

*... if decision making is based on the personal impression of the principal, this will be misused, so the school leader must be objective in his decisions and not allow his relationships to affect his judgement. I think at the beginning of the implementation this problem may arise, but with independent accountability, this will be limited... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

This comment indicated an uncertain opinion about the influence of personal relationships on decision making. It is one of the most sensitive issues with regards to school management being granted the authority to make decisions such as appointing and dismissing teachers.

The relationship between misuse of authority and accountability was also confirmed by an educational expert, who said:

*...the abuse of authority has two sides. First, self-accountability, if an appropriate principal is chosen, he will do so. Second, the external accountability to an independent body will overcome this matter... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

These results show that there is potential for misuse of authority by school principals. Autonomy in schools opens up the possibility for more opportunistic behaviour on the part of local school personnel (Hanushek, et al., 2013). However, principals should be trusted with greater autonomy and then subject to performance evaluation. Granting authority develops confidence and improves decisions by moving them close to the action (Yukl, 2010). In low trust nations, the centralisation of the decision-making process is more common, which causes further corruption, while in high trust societies there is a tendency towards decentralisation (Athanasouli & Goujard, 2015). Social trust has a strong influence in terms of the locus of decision-making authority in the hierarchy. In addition, the shift of decision-making authority from superiors to subordinates is more likely when levels of trust are high (Andrei & Johanna, 2017). Although the level of trust is not high in the study context, it seems that giving principals greater authority will increase their confidence, and this is reflected in their decisions and their use of power. This is because there are many evaluation parties in the field of education, and it is thus easy to detect abuse of authority.

In contrast to earlier findings, however, no evidence of misuse of authority in decentralisation was detected. For example, Devas (2005) noted that there is a certain amount of realistic evidence that fiscal decentralisation is linked with lower levels of corruption. Furthermore, in the PISA 2009 results, there was an indication that systems with greater autonomy have more accountability and systems with less autonomy have less accountability (Ikeda, 2011). Thus, this accountability should answer the concerns of the participants in this study regarding the abuse of authority for pure personal interest. This accountability would not only increase the level of learning and the student results, but also ensure that school principals were doing their jobs properly.

Overall, there are four issues that emerged from these results in terms of the misuse the authority in autonomous schools via principals. It is possible that personal and human relationships may result in personal reasons for the misuse of authority. However, selecting qualified principals through clear and ethical standards may avoid any misuse of authority from the outset. In addition, decision making in which essential decisions are made by the school board and not by individuals themselves should limit such exploitation of authority. Moreover, the existence of independent and external accountability will minimise any exploitation or misuse of authority for any reason and under any circumstances.

## **8.5 Resistance to Change**

### **8.5.1 Internal Resistance**

Six of the school principals and three educational experts interviewed argued that teachers will resist shifting to decentralisation because the decision making related to teachers' issues will be made by school management without reference to the Ministry of Education. A principal was asked about the expected barriers and challenges that might face school management when applying school autonomy. He said:

*...any new idea at school, it is possible to be resisted by teachers and staff. However, I think raising awareness and illustrating the advantages of autonomy will enhance the importance of autonomy and make its features more obvious. I do not expect long-term resistance because, over time, the positive impact of school autonomy will rise for all within the school... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Change often aims to develop and add new ways to facilitate work, but teachers are, justifiably, concerned about the impact of this change on their work. The fear of job loss and lack of security are the main issues that might make teachers feel anxious. Therefore, they may resist shifting to decentralisation and granting principals greater autonomy. A school principal commented:

*... I think some teachers will resistance the moving to decentralisation for different reasons such as losing freedom and job security. Employees often do not think about the objective of change, but how this change affects their job, they fear job loss... (Khalid - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Other comments in the interviews suggested that it is not easy to persuade teachers of school autonomy; an educational expert said:

*...it will not be easy to convince teachers that all decisions should be left to the school principal. They will not accept that simply... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

However, teachers may need time to accept the change in the manner of decision making, especially in the knowledge that there is no way back to centralisation:

*... when teachers realise that this change is an irreversible decision by the government, they will agree with this step. They might feel uncomfortable in the beginning, but after that, they will deal with it as a fact... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The results of this theme can be summarised as follows. First, most of those who reported that internal resistance via teachers might be a challenge to implementing school autonomy said it will be just in the beginning; afterwards, teachers will accept this change. Second, the key reason for this resistance is that teachers will lose their freedom and job security because decision making will be made within the school. Third, to avoid this resistance or at least overcome it quickly, teacher awareness about the positive impacts of decentralisation should be raised. There have been various changes to the education system in recent years in Saudi Arabia, many of which have not been successful. Although these changes are not essential, they have left a particularly negative impression because of their ineffectiveness. Thus, internal resistance from teachers is a possible reaction when school autonomy is implemented.

### **8.5.2 External Resistance**

Five of the school principals and three educational experts interviewed revealed that parents and the external community may resist the implementation of school autonomy for the reasons discussed later in this section. Participants were asked to indicate whether they felt that their community would resist the shifting to decentralisation. The interviewees referred to the nature of human resistance to any change such as implementing school autonomy. In addition, it is the common culture of centralisation in most sectors in Saudi Arabia which may cause this resistance, because decentralisation represents a new system of education management. One principal said:

*... the resistance to change is a normal human reaction. The decision makers should deal with it as a normal phenomenon because most Saudi organisations are*

*central, so shifting to decentralisation will face resistance at the start... (Salah - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Others pointed out that the tangible success of autonomous schools represents a means by which to limit resistance within society:

*...the success of autonomous school will make people acknowledge that decentralisation is a good way of improving education. But this may take two to five years to see any results. The idea itself will convince society in the near future... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another interviewee explained how poor communication between schools and society may cause resistance because the public may not realise the expected positive impacts of shifting to decentralisation. In addition, the Ministry of Education did not succeed in some of its experiments to develop education over recent years, as an educational expert commented:

*...there may be resistance from the outside community to the implementation of autonomous schools because of the poor communication between schools and the public. Also, society perhaps fears failure because of other experiments that the Ministry of Education has implemented during recent years have failed ... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

A similar point of view, as expressed by another educational expert, is that convincing the public of the importance of the change to decentralisation will lead to reduced resistance:



*...the resistance from society depends on their understanding of the advantages of this change. If the Ministry of Education succeeds in explaining the idea of school autonomy and its impact on the development of school performance and student results, any resistance will be very limited... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Overall, these results indicate that resistance from the internal and external community is a possible challenge of shifting to decentralisation in terms of school management. The outcomes indicated several reasons for resistance to change such as a natural human reaction, poor communication between schools and the public, and the culture of centralisation in most sectors in the country. The data suggested that the ability to explain the notion of school autonomy and its positive impact on schools, as well as the concrete success of any such implementation, will help limit any associated resistance.

Resistance is a phenomenon that affects the process of change, delaying or slowing its beginning, obstructing or hindering its implementation, and increasing its costs (Ansoff, Kipley, Lewis, Helm-Stevens, & Ansoff, 2019). The concept of resistance to change is credited to Kurt Lewin, who first discussed it in the 1940s. His early research focussed on aspects of individual behaviour that must be addressed in order to bring about effective organisational change (Khan & Rehman, 2008). Even though “change is implemented for positive reasons such as adapting to volatile environmental conditions and remaining competitive, organisation members often react to change efforts in a negative manner and will resist them” (Yilmaz & Kilicoglu, 2013, p. 14). Thus, officials should consider resistance when applying new policies as a purely natural reaction. This would demand a very different stance from officials

and school principals in order to deal with people's reactions in the early stages of implementing autonomy at schools, especially when the results show slow improvement.

## 8.6 Qualified Leaders

Five of the school principals and four educational experts who were interviewed felt that finding qualified leaders was seen as a challenge to the implementation of school autonomy.

A school principal said:

*...at present, the Ministry of Education faces a great challenge to find schools' leaders under the current system. If we move to decentralisation system, the challenge will be greater to find leaders for autonomous schools who have professional skills and advanced qualifications ... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Some of the interviewees explained how shifting to decentralisation without the adequate preparation of school principals could have a serious, negative influence on this change. An educational expert emphasised this matter:

*...one from the difficulties and barriers is the shortage of qualified leaders who can take responsibility and make their own decisions. In some areas, it might be difficult to find qualified principals to lead the schools because of the difficulty of transportation and lack of basic service for living there... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The interviewees also pointed out that the implementation of school autonomy in some schools differs from the generalisation of the policy to all schools in terms of qualified leaders, as noted by one of the educational experts when he explained:

*...at the beginning of the implementation of the school autonomy, the Ministry of Education will not have a problem to find qualified leaders, but if they plan to generalise the idea, the officials will face a challenge to find qualified leaders. Also, training and preparing them will take time... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

These findings suggest that providing each autonomous school with a qualified leader is seen as one of the challenges of shifting to decentralisation and implementing school autonomy. School leadership is looked upon as one of the main determinants of the successful implementation of reform (Honingh & Urbanovic, 2013). There are some indicators that the current school principals have certain leadership features. For example, Almalki's research (2010), which was intended to investigate the extent to which school principals at high schools have transformational leadership features, found that most practice all, or at least some, of the four main elements of transformational leadership, which are idealised influence, inspirational motivation, individualised consideration and intellectual stimulation. However, the results of the current study found that leading school autonomy is a different task that requires highly qualified individuals. Thus, the Ministry of Education may face a particular challenge in finding skilled leaders for these schools.

There is no doubt that the selection of qualified individuals who can lead schools autonomously is essential, as is their preparation through training programmes for managing these schools before the implementation. However, there is a need for continuing

professional development for principals throughout their careers. Professional development is a long process that often starts with a pre-service degree and continues throughout their career (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Continuing professional development plays a key role in the learning and teaching processes (Guskey, 2002).

Similar results were found in a previous study exploring the leadership quality and qualifications in Saudi Arabia by Mathis (2010), who reported that nine of the 12 principals she had questioned had bachelor's degrees, whilst three of the 12 had only gained diplomas. The explanation for this lack of qualification was addressed by Karim (2014), in that principals "may not have studied educational leadership in their schooling, since not all Saudi universities include educational leadership or professional administrative in bachelor's programmes" (p. 123). In addition, these results further support the outcomes of a recent study by Baker et al. (2016), which was conducted in the US with the intention of identifying and assessing factors that contribute to effective autonomous school governance at the board of trustees' level.

The data was indicative of a growing realisation that the need to train school principals before moving to decentralisation "which will be discussed in the last chapter as one of the most important requirements for decentralisation in schools" is essential. These findings reflect the desire of principals to lead their schools independently, but with a degree of caution. They understand that leading an autonomous school is a different form of task to those they are already used to, and which requires greater readiness and additional qualifications. This reaction is positive because it reflects their eagerness to succeed. In addition, they know that the school principal will be fully responsible for all decisions and outcomes. This view is highlighted in the report on Improving School Leadership by the Organisation for Economic

Cooperation and Development (2008), in that: "There is a growing concern that the role of school principal designed for the industrial age has not changed enough to deal with the complex challenges schools are facing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (Beatriz et al., 2008, p. 16).

The new policy of *Tatweer* requires principles to have qualifications such as having a bachelor's degree and eight years of experience, either as a teacher or administrator, with a preference for hiring assistant principals depending on their in-service training (Mathis, 2010). However, these findings contain a clear message that many principals do not have the required qualifications for decentralisation. Thus, it would be interesting to investigate how the development of individual school leaders could be linked effectively to the development of individual schools in terms of qualifying school leadership teams via future research (Huber, 2016).

It is interesting to note that the interview responses of principals working in Riyadh and Sabya were slightly different in relation to the question of the challenges that school principals may face when implementing school autonomy. These differences, as mentioned earlier, related to school buildings. Both principals in state and rental schools claimed the current buildings were not suitable in relation to their designs and facilities; however, principals in rental schools in Sabya were more concerned about implementing school autonomy in rental schools. They believed that the shortcomings of rental schools such as lack of facilities, small classrooms, poorly ventilated buildings and locations (as stated by Sami, Majed and Hamad) would seriously hinder the principals' success in leading autonomous schools.

## **8.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has reported the results related to RQ4 which is “What are school principals’ perceptions of the challenges they may face when implementing school autonomy in relation to decision making and accountability?”. The findings exposed the fact that there are a number of expected challenges that may face the implementation of school autonomy. The next chapter will answer RQ5 regarding the support and professional development that school principals require for the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA.

## **Chapter 9: Data analysis and discussion (4)**

**RQ5: What additional support and professional development do school principals require for the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA in relation to decision making and accountability?**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the data collected from the survey with school principals and semi-structured interviews conducted with principals and education experts. This chapter will answer RQ5 which is “what additional support and professional development do school principals require for the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA in relation to decision making and accountability?” It will be organised into two sections: quantitative and qualitative data. Specifically, the quantitative section of RQ5 sets out principals’ perceptions of the methods of implementing decentralisation in education. Qualitative results focus on the key needs for implementing school autonomy: accountability, budgets, selection criteria, training, preparing the school buildings, marketing of the idea of decentralisation, the gradation of implementation, and the incentives. In the qualitative section of the findings, the interviews with principals will be presented first, followed by the results of interviews with educational experts.

## 9.2 Quantitative results

### 9.2.1 Male principals' perceptions of the methods of implementing decentralisation

As shown in Table (9.1), male school principals gave their perceptions of the methods of implementing decentralisation in education. Overall, the majority of male participants felt that the approaches to implementing decentralisation needed additional consideration of certain issues such as gradual implementation, setting certain criteria for selecting principals, and establishing independent accountability organisations. For example, 89 (94.7%), felt that establishing independent accountability organisations would be necessary for autonomy in schools, while only 5 (5.3%) did not agree with the need for accountability in shifting to decentralisation.

*Table 9.1 Male principals' perceptions of the methods of implementing decentralisation in education*

Themes	Agree		Disagree	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Granting schools greater autonomy should be applied gradually	77	81.9%	17	18.1%
The sudden transition from centralisation to decentralisation may have a negative impact	58	61.7%	36	38.3%
Establishing independent accountability organisations is necessary for autonomy in schools	89	94.7%	5	5.3%
Specific criteria should be set for selecting principals	87	92.6%	7	7.4%
Parents are a key factor for school autonomy successful	60	63.8%	34	36.2%
Raising the awareness of society will help to support decentralisation	56	59.6%	38	40.4%
Applying decentralisation in other sectors in the country will be useful for applying it in education	58	61.7%	36	38.3%



These results perhaps point to the fact that applying school autonomy suddenly, without progressive implementation, may result in the failure of the project, which means there is a need to select a few schools in which to test autonomy to evaluate its performance. Afterwards, based on the results, the decision can be made as to whether to expand the implementation or to wait and develop the policy in the targeted schools further. The gradual change in educational institutions can be readily justified, as well as potentially being a positive element. The practices associated with an institution tend to be determined by trial and error over long periods of time (Gardner, 2004). The results also indicated the importance of external factors for the success of school autonomy, such as accountability (Scott, 1994), raising awareness outside the school, and generalising decentralisation across various other sectors, not only in education.

### **9.2.2 Female principals' perceptions of the methods of implementing decentralisation**

Overall, female school principals felt that the approach of implementing school autonomy should consider certain issues such as establishing independent accountability organisations and setting specific criteria for selecting principals in schools. Generally, the perceptions of male and female were similar in relation to the methods of implementing decentralisation in education. However, female school principals were more certain (94.2%) that granting schools greater autonomy should be applied gradually compared to male school principals (81.9%); see Table 9.2.

*Table 9.2 Female principals' perceptions of the methods of implementing decentralisation in education*

Themes	Agree		Disagree	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Granting schools greater autonomy should be applied gradually	49	94.2%	3	5.8%
The sudden transition from centralisation to decentralisation may have a negative impact	33	63.5%	19	36.5%
Establishing independent accountability organisations is necessary for autonomy in schools	50	96.2%	2	3.8%
Specific criteria should be set for selecting principals	51	98.1%	1	1.9%
Parents are a key factor for school autonomy successful	33	63.5%	19	36.5%
Raising the awareness of society will help to support decentralisation	32	61.5%	20	38.5%
Applying decentralisation in other sectors in the country will be useful for applying it in education	32	61.5%	20	38.5%

These results are consistent with those of Mathis (2010), who found that less than a third of her sample became principals without first having served as vice principals. In addition, the results further support the ideas expressed by Ross and Gray (2006), namely that transformative leadership skills are necessary for a school to be effective. In terms of involving both parents and communities in school management, the current results are in line with those of Coelho (2009) in that autonomy involves parents and local communities and empowers them in terms of participating in school management. Furthermore, the results further support the ideas expressed by Damien (2011), who found that accountability in education helped to achieve quality within schools. Similarly, Tawfeeq (2010) indicated the significance of establishing some external independent unit responsible for educational accountability.

From tables (9.1 and 9.2), it can be seen that a slightly higher percentage of male principals compared to female principals agree the change to decentralisation should be implemented

quickly. Therefore, females appear more cautious about the pace of change. This could be interpreted as females being more aware of the challenges, understanding how long it can really take to bring about change to reform educational systems. Women have experienced how long it has taken for attitudes to change towards women leaders, to which there is still some resistance in education, despite legislative and policy changes to facilitate women's leadership (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Therefore, they understand the complexities implementing government policy to reform practice.

### **9.3 Qualitative results**

This section presents the results from the interviews with school principals and educational experts. They were asked about schools' key needs for the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA.

#### **9.3.1 Accountability**

Eight school principals and four educational experts reported that accountability is one of the key needs for implementing autonomous schools. There are several perceptions gained from the results related to accountability. First was the impact of accountability on the quality of education. One principal said:

*...I think external accountability is necessary for decentralisation in schools to improve performance because giving the authority to schools' principals without accountability will cause problems... (Faisal - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another principal commented:

*...for good-quality education, accountability should be independent in which the Ministry of Education cannot control it... (Salim - semi-structured interviews-1).*

These results are in line with the PISA (2009) report that schools in nations with greater autonomy and accountability show better performance than those without, while in nations with no such accountability system, improvements in performance are generally quite hindered (OECD, 2010). These results corroborate the ideas expressed by the World Bank (2016), namely that autonomy and accountability are the main factors in improving the quality of education. In addition, Roberts (1991), Gillmore (1997), Hanushek and Raymond (2004) argued that school performance and student results tend to be better when schools are made accountable.

Another view offered by an educational expert was that increasing accountability may have a negative influence on school performance. Thus, he emphasised the necessity of balance between autonomy and accountability.

*...accountability must be balanced with autonomy in schools, because its increase may negatively affect performance... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Increasing school autonomy must be accompanied by a high level of accountability, but whilst taking into consideration the fact that increasing accountability may produce non-independent students (Hamilton, 2015).

## Self-Accountability

Some participants argued that self-accountability can be enhanced via the religious motivations that should lead schools' principals to better performance, but this is not sufficient unless there is also external accountability. One principal pointed out that:

*...Our culture and religion make us act honestly, and hold ourselves accountable before others assess our deeds, whether officials or parents... (Nasir - semi-structured interviews-1).*

*An educational expert said:*

*...in our community, our religion and belief enhance self-accountability, but this is not enough unless some external body evaluates the schools' acts... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Another point of view emphasised the importance of self-accountability and sense of responsibility, but from another perspective, an educational expert commented:

*...I think that accountability in schools is complex because some standards can be set, and some indicators can be measured, but there are accurate and influential details occurring within the school that cannot be easily measured ... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Self-accountability involves the self-evaluation of behaviour and its consequence(s), and any voluntary changes of behaviour (Bergsteiner, 2012). In fact, the public administration needs

the accountability that emerges from inside as a moral, or beyond that as worship. Self-accountability is essential to enhance actions, work, and relationships with others (Mordhah, 2012). As mentioned in the Saudi context earlier in this research, the entire population is Muslim. Thus, it is important to discuss the link between self-accountability and accountability in terms of Islam. For example, Lewis (2006) argued that "Accounting in the broad sense is central to Islam, since accountability to God and the community for all activities is paramount to a Muslim's faith" (p. 2). Also, the word "*hesab*" in Arabic, which means accountability, is repeated more than eight times in different verses of the Quran (Askary & Clarke, 1997). Islam, as a religion, urges self-accountability and this motivation has an impact on most people. To summarise, accountability that comes from a deep belief or persuasion stemming from a moral and ethical basis should be considered, because morals and values are observed differently, but if those ethics emerged from one divine source such as Islam, any conflicts would be negated (Mordhah, 2012).

The definition of accountability is "the acceptance or responsibility and being answerable of one's actions" (Arcia et al., 2011, p. 2) which is also based on basic measurements and could lead to absolute results (Mordhah, 2012). However, in public administration, such as in education, not all actions can be measured because schoolchildren are affected by the behaviours of, and guidance received from, principals and teachers. Education is not similar to other sectors which depend on external accountability to measure their actions and performance. This means enhancing self-accountability is important for school leaders and teachers in order to ensure that all staff ethics and behaviour set a good example to the students. Nevertheless, this does not mean that external accountability in education is not important, but there is a need to strike a balance between the two.

## Who Should be Held Accountable?

The results revealed a significant question, which is “who should be held accountable?”, i.e., government or autonomous bodies.

*...the role of government in accountability of schools is fundamental, but in the decentralisation of schools, accountability must be determined by an independent body, which is not directly supervised by the government ... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Heinecke, Curry-Corcoran, & Moon (2003) indicated two essential models of accountability with regards to the policy agenda, which are a market-oriented approach, and a state-regulated approach. Schools that adopt the former are held accountable for student performance standards, whereas the students and schools that adopt the latter are held accountable for achieving high standards based on test results.

Another issue to emerge from the results is that accountability should be applied via an autonomous body with support from the Ministry of Education.

*... we still have confusion in education between accountability and support. I think in autonomous schools we need to differentiate between the two of them in which the support comes from government and accountability from an independent body... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

This finding was also reported by Fahmy and Mahmoud (1993) and Ashkar (2006), who noted that some principals objected to top-down supervision as they did not know the exact

responsibilities of the supervisors. The current study did not focus on the current accountability and evaluation of school leaders' performance because, in fact, there *is* no external accountability; rather, each regional area in the KSA has an assigned representative whose main responsibility is to supervise local school principals and teachers (Khalil & Karim, 2016). However, school leaders reported that the supervisors are evaluators rather than supervisors, as based on the reasonable assumption that evaluators offer critique, while supervisors advise. In addition, they described their supervisors' visits as ineffective, as they led to feelings of fear, anxiety, and confusion (Khalil & Karim, 2016).

Considering the context of Saudi Arabia and the transition process currently underway in the country, accountability becomes one of the components of the current state administration that accompanies greater autonomy. Thus, I would argue that the current reform across the country, especially over the last two years, is in line with the results of this research in the sense that the government is shifting toward greater autonomy and strict accountability. Thus, it can be suggested from the results of this study and the literature review that accountability is a key component of shifting to decentralisation in education and granting schools greater autonomy.

These findings are consistent with those of Damien (2011), who found that applying educational accountability helped to achieve quality in education. The results of the current study also suggest that accountability must be implemented via some independent external body which can evaluate schools without bias. This finding broadly supports the work of Tawfeeq (2010), which indicated the importance of establishing an external independent unit responsible for educational accountability.



*External accountability refers to the process of subjectively or objectively evaluating the contribution that others have made to a consequence, where appropriate calling on these others to account for the consequences of their actions and for how this consequence came about, and applying accountability responses such as rewarding, sponsoring, mentoring, supporting, giving feedback, counselling, training, directing, sanctioning or punishing (Bergsteiner, 2012, p. 25).*

In addition, Gobby (2013) argued that decentralisation can improve school performance if attention is given to addressing the tools of accountability, the effectiveness of school leadership, the social and cultural aspects of schools and the quality of teaching. However, decentralisation in itself does not improve school or system performance.

The results also indicated the importance of accountability in overcoming any misuse of authority by principals.

*“Within countries where schools are held to account for their results through posting achievement data publicly, schools that enjoy greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to do better than those with less autonomy. However, in countries where there are no such accountability arrangements, the reverse is true.” (OECD, 2010, p. 105).*

In the UK government’s consultation paper on school accountability (2013), there was an emphasis on the importance of accountability: “The most effective education systems around the world are those that have high levels of autonomy along with clear and robust accountability” (Benton, 2014, p. 2).

*Performance standards are typically associated with accountability systems. Over the past decade, accountability systems based on student performance have become more common in many OECD countries, and results are often widely reported and used in public debate to inform parents about school choice and to prompt improvements in schools. The rationale for and nature of these accountability systems, however, vary greatly within and across countries. The OECD countries use different forms of external assessment, external evaluation or inspection, and schools' own quality-assurance and self-evaluation efforts (OECD, 2010, p. 76).*

### **9.3.2 Budgets**

Seven of the school principals and four educational experts interviewed argued that the provision of adequate budgets is one of the main requirements of shifting to decentralisation in terms of the management of schools. The key requirement for the success of school autonomy is providing schools with sufficient funds. One principal emphasised the vital role of this matter, stating that:

*...to ensure a successful shifting to decentralisation when empowering the school and give it greater autonomy, the government must provide adequate budgets to every single school... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The principals felt that state funding is not, in itself, sufficient for schools; rather, they also need private sector participation:

*...nowadays the source of funding and materials for schools is the government as the main provider, but school autonomy requires other sectors to be involved to support schools... (Khalid - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Participants indicated two major issues relating to autonomous school budgets, which are external accountability and the introduction of a financial management department within schools:

*...budgetary in autonomous schools needs external accountability for how these funds are disbursed, and I expect each school to have a specialised financial management department within the school... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another commented:

*...the ministry of education granted school principals more autonomy over their budget over the last two years in terms of maintaining school buildings. They showed excellent abilities to manage this budget. Thus, the government should trust them with the whole budget as a part of decentralisation. I think more autonomy without sufficient funding will cause many difficulties... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Essentially, what matters most is that all autonomous schools receive the finances they need to successfully educate their students and improve their performance according to an educational expert:

*... providing autonomous schools with a sufficient budget enables them to improve services to students that would not have been possible without the greater autonomy and sufficient fund from the government... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Participants also considered budgetary autonomy, increasing teachers' salaries and financial sustainability to be significant in implementing school autonomy:

*...we want budgetary autonomy and the ability to make teacher salaries competitive with the salaries of other professions. Also, there is a need for financial sustainability in schools... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The results are significant in four major respects. First, the autonomous schools should be provided with a sufficient budget. Second, autonomous schools must diversify their sources of funding, which should not only be derived from the government, but also from other sectors. Third, external accountability, a financial management department and financial sustainability are fundamental to the implementation of school autonomy. Fourth, a shortage of the budget in autonomous schools will lead to difficulties.

The Saudi government faces a number of economic difficulties because of its decades-long reliance on oil, whose price has decreased over the last few years. Thus, the government may face challenges in providing all its schools with proper budgets. However, this problem can be addressed in two ways. First, as the principals' interviews indicated, granting schools greater autonomy will give schools the chance to use the facilities for rental purposes during the evenings and weekends, as well as using the schools for advertising. Second, by involving the private and charitable sectors in terms of supporting and funding schools.

Managing the educational budget is a key challenge that may face the government in the coming years. The OECD (2012) has indicated a number of funding strategies that may help to avoid difficulties in funding education:

*(1) balance decentralisation, autonomy and accountability to ensure that resources reach schools and are well spent. (2) Decentralising educational funding to local authorities can increase responsiveness to local needs – but it may not be effective if either the funding is inadequate or local authorities lack the required capacity. (3) Schools should keep autonomy in areas where school-level knowledge is more relevant, such as managing their personnel, while the central level should control resource levels and performance standards (p. 72).*

These results seem to be contrary to that of Galiani et al. (2002), who found that the impact of decentralisation on schools located in poor and badly administered provinces can be negative because of financial shortages, and those with financial deficits performed worse than under centralisation. Thus, decentralisation can lead to growth in local inequality and fiscal instability in certain areas.

As mentioned in the literature review, one solution to overcoming the spending crisis in education is privatisation, which has “become increasingly popular in educational governance, especially under the impact of globalisation” (Mok, 2003, p. 351). Furthermore, Mok (2003) and Liu (2010) indicated the correlation between decentralisation and privatisation in education. However, each case or country should be considered independently. For example, Geo-Jaja (2004) suggests that both decentralisation and privatisation in education have created a new dimension of educational inequality in Nigeria. In addition, he concluded that no relation can be stated to exist between decentralisation and educational improvement.

Thus, in Saudi Arabia, privatisation may not be appropriate at the beginning of the decentralisation transition.

Another example from China was where the government reduced funding from all levels of government via privatisation of schools and the decentralisation of funding. However, “in most countries, central governments continued to finance almost the entirety of their educational systems” (Hanson, 2000, p. 409) because this affected the legitimacy of the state and resulted in a change in people’s perception of the central government (Geo-Jaja, 2004). This confirms the influence of politics on educational reform, therefore, it is useful to remind oneself of the purpose of this study, which is the possibility of decentralisation in education, not privatisation in which the government is still the main source responsible for funding education.

There are three main methods to determine the annual allocation of resources that schools receive: administrative discretion, incremental costs and several variables such as student numbers and grade level-based, needs-based, curriculum or educational programme-based and school characteristics-based (OECD, 2012).

*Each country has its own approach to school financing, and the policy options considered are inevitably intertwined with the economics and politics of the associated education system. Moreover, financing is at the crossroads of dimensions such as decentralisation, autonomy and accountability. There are several policy options available to improve funding in order to overcome school failure and reduce dropout in OECD education systems (OECD, 2012, p. 74).*

The Saudi government is the only source of school finance; the government funding for all schools and universities is based on oil as the key source of the country's entire budget. However, with recent decreases in the price of oil, the government has made the decision to diversify the sources of its national income (Vision 2030, 2017). The development of education requires very large budgets, as well as expert and professional management to manage the associated budgets. This requires diversification of budget sources as well as training of education leaders.

### **9.3.3 Selection Criteria**

Seven of the school principals and four educational experts interviewed reported that setting certain criteria for selecting the principals and teachers of autonomous schools is fundamental to school autonomy because values and morals should be vital to the choice of principals and teachers (Fullan, 2001). For example, an educational expert pointed out a number of criteria:

*...autonomous schools need leaders who have the capability to create a shared vision and lead innovation and change within schools. Also, the ability to produce and implement improvement of the school plans as well as open good communication with the external community... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Another issue suggested by the interviewees was the need to set criteria for selecting the teachers of autonomous schools because they felt that teachers are the soul of the education process; one of them said:

*...autonomous schools need qualified teachers because teaching within the classroom is the soul of education. When teachers are selected carefully, the*

*students become more creative. So, decision makers should set criteria for teachers who can be accepted in autonomous schools... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The implications of selecting high-performance teachers on the students' attainment reflect the significance of setting high standards for choosing teachers via school principals. As mentioned earlier in this study, in terms of selecting teachers, the principals interviewed claimed that, currently, they have no authority to select or dismiss teachers, some of whom are not sufficiently qualified. However, in autonomous schools, principals will have the authority to select them but through specific criteria.

### **Decision-making Ability**

The interviewees reported that the current criteria are not sufficient to select autonomous school principals, which means that new criteria should be prepared:

*...we have currently in Saudi education some criteria for selecting school principals such as qualifications and experience, but I think school autonomy needs more professional criteria to select leaders such as decision-making ability ... (Salah - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Participants also pointed out a number of criteria for autonomous school principals such as decision-making ability, providing vision and development planning, and an awareness of global changes and their impact on education; in this regard, an educational expert said:



*... school autonomy needs a leader who can make good decisions, set a clear vision and direction and build trust between teachers and empower them. I think the principal should also be aware of external changes and their influence on learning and school outcomes... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

This statement defined the criteria by which an autonomous school principal should be considered. These skills and features are commonly considered to be the abilities that help principals to lead their schools effectively.

### **Enthusiasm**

A key finding to emerge from the data related to the criteria for selecting principals is the importance of their enthusiasm toward their job; an educational expert said:

*...we can lead our schools autonomously, but some of us do not have the desire and motivation to stay in our positions for different reasons. I think finding enthusiastic leaders is fundamental to implementing school autonomy... (Yosif - semi-structured interviews-1).*

It is possible that granting principals greater autonomy will make them more enthusiastic leaders because they consider the authority granted to be an important incentive, as one of principal commented:

*...I think giving principals more authority is a key incentive because they will feel free to make their own decisions... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Thus, it is assumed that granting them more authority could increase their enthusiasm for their work and induce improved performance. In addition, one of the new-liberalism concepts is the ideal of free, individual choice, which is linked to performance and efficiency (Kotz, 2002). Gill and Scharff (2011) also indicated that the autonomous and self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to free choice. This relationship between free choice and better performance is likely to be related to enthusiasm towards work.

These findings suggest that the selection criteria for school leaders in Saudi Arabia are not fit for task and should not be applied. A possible explanation for this might be that teachers, who are ultimately the only resource for selecting principals, are not willing to be in this position for the various reasons mentioned earlier such as the lack of incentives, work overload and a lack of authority. The key basis for selecting skilled leaders for autonomous schools is the improvement of student achievement because the work performed by principals is the most powerful factor affecting student attainment (Caldwell, 2016).

In addition, these findings suggest that selecting high-performance teachers is a key requirement for the successful implementation of school autonomy. For example, a recent study by Caldwell (2016) attempted to investigate "How have schools with a relatively high degree of autonomy used their increased authority and responsibility to make decisions that have led, in an explicit cause-and-effect fashion, to higher levels of student achievement?" His study revealed that schools used their autonomy to select staff and allocate funds from their budgets, each being capacities that came with a higher level of autonomy. In addition, it was found that there is an impact of increasing the degree of autonomy on student results.

In most contexts, exercising leadership involves the scope for decision making and influential action, which can have considerable consequences for others (Evers, 1992). In the context of

schools, leaders, via their decisions and actions, help to shape student character and determine their futures. The influence of the school principal's decisions also extends to the wider community. Hence, the selection process for autonomous schools should be subjected to more professional criteria. In addition, "what leaders do, particularly those in educational organisations or contexts, comes under, and ought to come under, close scrutiny" (Evers, 1992, p. 21). Krug (1992) argued that the ability to understand the meaning of contextual variables and respond thoughtfully to them appears to be the extent of school leaders' effectiveness. The findings of this study suggest that to select an autonomous school principal, it is important to set the criteria by which to assess a candidate through their character, abilities and skills.

On the other hand, some researchers believe that identifying the distinctive features of successful leaders is impossible. For example, Duke (1987), states that "no single set of behaviours characterises all successful instructional leaders" (p. 81); however, there are essential indicators that should be considered when selecting the school leader. For example, Ross and Gray (2006) found transformative leadership skills to be necessary for the school to be effective, which is the ability to identify and sustain a vision of the school and individual consideration for others, namely the interpersonal or human skill.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, the only selection requirement for school principal candidates when the MoE was established in 2003 was their teaching experience. In many schools, the usual way to become a principal was to serve as vice principal for a few years (Khalil & Karim, 2016). These requirements have developed over time, however. For example, in the *Tatweer* project, the required qualifications for principals are to have a bachelor's degree and eight years of experience either as a teacher or administrator, with a preference for hiring

assistant principals. Mathis (2010) and Karim (2014) pointed out that the majority of principals of *Tatweer* Schools have a bachelor's degree. In fact, *Tatweer* schools are no different to public schools in terms of authority and decision making. However, the problem here is the application of these criteria. For example, Mathis (2010) found less than a third of her sample became principals without first having served as a vice principal. Thus, these findings suggested setting professional and suitable criteria for autonomous school principals because the current criteria, such as having a bachelor's degree and a certain number of years' experience, are not sufficient to allow the principal to lead the school independently and achieve its goals.

#### **9.3.4 Training**

Seven principals and four educational experts agreed that training is a fundamental requirement for shifting to decentralisation in terms of preparing school principals and teachers. The results revealed that the current training courses are not professional and need considerable development:

*...to help the principal of an autonomous school acquire the knowledge and skills and to become more effective, we need professional training to make sure that the principal has the ability to lead the school autonomously because they will be a key factor of school's performance... (Nasir - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Similarly, a principal indicated the lack of current training and the importance of skilled leaders for autonomous schools:

*...granting school leaders autonomy is a good idea, but it needs some requirements such as training because the current training is not sufficient. Decentralisation in schools requires skilled leaders... (Yosif - semi-structured interviews-1).*

In relation to the quality of training, participants reported that the current training has some weaknesses and implementing autonomy in schools needs improvement in terms of its training courses. One principal said:

*...when we granted authority, but we need training on how to use it. I think the problem will be greater when the school leaders are not qualified to have greater authority... (Saad - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The training should include an explanation of the features of school autonomy according to a principal:

*... we need training for teachers and staff about the notion of school autonomy and what the differences are between current schools and autonomous schools... (Salah - semi-structured interviews-1).*

An educational expert spoke of the lack of assessment of the needs of trainees, and who linked the success of school autonomy with professional training:

*...training courses sometimes do not target trainee's needs. Training is very important for the success of school management and teaching. So, implementing school autonomy must be preceded by professional training to ensure its success... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Accuracy in identifying the needs of trainees, in addition to the quality of continuous training, were the most important requirements for implementing autonomous schools, as referred to by an education expert:

*... continuous high-quality training, building on the needs of trainees, is a key factor, in improving the performance of school leaders and teachers. In order to ensure the success of autonomous schools, much attention must be given to training ... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

These findings reflect the importance of training principals and teachers before and during the implementation of school autonomy. The results focussed on certain issues in terms of training. First, the quality and continuity of training. Second, the differences between state schools and autonomous schools in which autonomous schools need more highly trained principals. Third, the results also indicated the negative implications of recruiting unskilled principals in autonomous schools. Finally, the training courses should build on the needs of trainees because, currently, the Ministry of Education controls and designs training courses for all the schools around the country, but the needs of principals and teachers differ from one school to another.

Similar results were found in relation to the quality of training by Nasser (2011), whose entire sample of 90 principals reported their need for training to help them to improve their performances; however, the Ministry of Education did not provide them with their needs. In addition, Spicker (2012) argued that “there seems to be a sense that whatever the context and whatever the framework, encouraging leadership, training people to be leaders and developing the skills of leadership is bound to improve their effectiveness” (p. 42).

These results also are in agreement with those obtained by Abu Al-Ula (2003) and Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) in that the capabilities of a school leader and their training are key to making appropriate decisions. Thus, it can be seen that when the government grants school principals greater autonomy, it should also provide them with professional training to ensure that they practice their authority appropriately. The reason for considering training as a key requirement for the implementation of school autonomy is perhaps that the decision is made through appropriate consideration of three steps, which are intelligence, design and choice (Simon, 1960). This means the problem needs to be investigated and alternatives developed, after which the activity of selecting the most appropriate option of action from the alternatives created can finally be described (Dillon, 1998).

The position of school principal requires continuous high-quality training because leadership is among the most strongly influential factors on learning, and only a school principal who is in a position to provide excellent teaching and learning in each classroom will be suitable (Mitgang, 2012). The importance of school principals was also confirmed by Louis et al. (2010), who conducted a six-year study and analysed data from 180 schools in nine states in the US, and who reported that: "To date we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" (p. 9). Moreover, school principals have experience, the advantage of being close to the relevant problems, and have a good understanding of the context of the situation in their schools, both of which should help them to generate multiple potential solutions to their problems and to further evaluate them until they are comfortable with one particular choice (Klein, 1999); school principals without decision-making skills would be unlikely to produce acceptable outcomes. Thus, school principals need to be trained in how to practice leadership skills, such as when making decisions.

The possible explanation of these results might be because participants felt that current training does not meet their needs. For example, Karim (2014) reported that only 35% of the principals of developed schools had had more than a week of training, with the majority having attended one, two or three days of training at most. In another example, Mathis (2010) revealed that a newly appointed principal reported she had not received any training whatsoever. In addition, Alyawar (2010) determined that the reason for the lack of skills and knowledge among a large proportion of principals, central office administrators, and regional supervisors was because they attended the same training courses. Her study concluded that the majority of the 166 education leaders questioned revealed the mode of training in these sessions was outdated.

To summarise, the clear message from the data is that the application of school autonomy needs to be accompanied with appropriate preparation and continued training because one of the risks identified with regards to school autonomy when moving to decentralisation is that the wholesale move to school autonomy may cause problems because of a lack of qualified principals. To better train such principals, Mitgang (2012) has identified five necessary steps. The first of these steps is a more selective choice of candidates for training. The second is that aspiring principals need pre-service training. The third is that the quality of principal training should be properly developed to meet their exact needs. The fourth is that support for the training courses should be offered through standard-setting, programme accreditation, principal certification and financial support for highly qualified candidates. The fifth is that school principals should be provided with high-quality mentoring and professional development in the early years after assuming their post.



### 9.3.5 Preparing School Buildings

Interviewees made mention of school buildings three times in the results of this study, the first as one of the current challenges that face principals with regards to their work, the second as one of the expected challenges that may face autonomous schools' principals, and the third that preparing school buildings was one of the prerequisites of implementing school autonomy. These ideas will not be discussed extensively here because they have already been discussed earlier in this thesis.

Seven school principals and four educational experts revealed that preparing school buildings is a key need for shifting to decentralisation and granting schools greater autonomy. The modern building facilitates the task of principals and teachers and helps them to apply new teaching approaches. Thus, preparing buildings is a key requirement for autonomous schools according to one principal:

*...the current buildings will not help principals to achieve the goals of autonomous schools. Before the implementation, the government must prepare the schools buildings in line with the development of teaching methods... (Salim - semi-structured interviews-1).*

In addition, the buildings of autonomous school need a new design as a principal suggestion:

*...I suggest that the Ministry of Education prepare a new model of building for autonomous schools in which differ completely to the current buildings... (Sami - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Similarly, an educational expert indicated the importance of school buildings and their preparation for school autonomy:

*...the first step that the government should take is improving the school building because it plays a key role in school performance... (Ali - semi-structured interviews-2).*

### **9.3.6 Marketing of decentralisation idea**

Six school principals and three educational experts reported that the Ministry of Education should market the idea of school autonomy in the community and between parents and teachers, and further clarify the importance of shifting to decentralisation and its role in the development of education well before its actual implementation. The results revealed that any sudden action towards such a policy may affect the performance of schools in a negative manner. One principal commented:

*...I think if school autonomy starts correctly it will be successful. Raising the awareness within schools for teachers and students, and outside of schools for parents and the whole society is essential before implementation... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Parents and teachers are key factors in education, so involving them from the beginning of any new policies is of particular importance. One principal said:

*...implementing school autonomy before convincing teachers and parents of the advantages of autonomy and accountability is not a good idea. They may resist,*

*and the idea will then fail at the beginning... (Majed - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The culture of centralisation in the country may represent a barrier unless the Ministry of Education conducts an introductory programme before the implementation of school autonomy. One principal explained this matter:

*...the most state organisations systems are central, so moving to decentralisation needs preparation. Changing the management system requires convincing people of the importance of this step... (Faisal - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another interviewee felt that parents and society need to understand the implications of granting schools greater autonomy because they will play a key role in subsequent accountability:

*...because the community, parents and all beneficiaries of education will become part of accountability, it is important to raise their awareness of the school autonomy system and the role it will play in education reform... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Similarly, another said:

*...the implementation will be difficult for one reason, which is the culture surrounding the school. For the idea to succeed, parents, teachers and student need to accept the idea. Some parents who pay more attention to their children' education might refuse it. So, raising awareness of the goals of the new policy will help to overcome the barriers... (Umar - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The data suggest that preparing parents, teachers, students and society for the shift to decentralisation and giving schools greater autonomy will help achieve success. The interview data reflected the fact that principals and educators had already learned from previous mistakes and realised the significance of involving all related parties in applying new policies.

According to Coelho (2009), decentralisation involves parents, teachers and local communities and empowers them in terms of school management. In addition, the elected school committees reflect their communities. This means that the local community and parents are part of the implementation, and as such they need to be provided with any necessary information and be informed as to the goals of school autonomy so as to be able to perform their roles appropriately.

Here, we give an example of a project that the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia implemented without first promoting it with teachers and parents, and without involving teachers during the planning stages. This project was referred to as the “developed curriculum”, which was started a few years ago. However, school principals and teachers had difficulties in its actual implementation. The Ministry of Education is currently attempting to address this problem by setting up “in-service training programmes”. However, it seems that solving this issue will take some considerable time because, from the beginning, the initial lack of clarity about the project had already effectively shaped its outcome. In other words, principals, teachers and students gained the impression that the “developed curriculum” was an invalid and inappropriate method of teaching because they were not, at any point, provided with sufficient information to understand it properly. In the Saudi education system, which is

centralised, principals and teachers do not typically receive information about new projects until they receive the relevant instructions from the Ministry of Education to implement them. Thus, the results of this study suggest that raising awareness and marketing school autonomy before its implementation will avoid a repeat of this same mistake.

Although the “developed curriculum” project was an appropriate method to enhance teaching and improve student results, there were several key steps that were missing prior to its implementation, namely those of teacher participation, raising awareness and gradual implementation during its early stages. Thus, applying school autonomy should avoid the same mistake by preparing thoroughly and in advance.

### **9.3.7 Gradual implementation**

Six school principals and three educational experts argued the need for the gradual implementation of school autonomy from various perspectives, depending on which way was considered the most suitable for the shift to decentralisation in schools. There are three opinions as to how implementation should proceed. First, seven of the school principal interviewees supported experimenting with autonomy in a small group of schools, after which any progress could be assessed before large-scale implementation. For example, one school principal said:

*... I think implementing autonomy in some schools in the main cities is better, because of their modern buildings and facilities, and if they succeed, the application can be expanded... (Saad - semi-structured interviews-1).*

An educational expert had the same view:

*... generalising autonomy before examining it in a few schools is a great risk.*

*Change in the education system is a complicated process, so it should be applied gradually ... (Yasir - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Second, two of the interviewees believed that the government should grant school principals greater autonomy in some limited respects such as the budgets in the first stage, then all matters related to teachers in the following stages.

*... giving schools autonomy in some respects such as managing the budget is better than applying it entirely and when they succeed, they become for example, qualified to select teachers and appoint them ... (Salman - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Some participants linked the success of autonomy in schools to the approach taken towards its implementation:

*... it is inappropriate when school principals are given complete authority in one phase. The progressive application of autonomy in schools is the proper way to increase the chance of success... (Khalid - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Third, one interviewee states a different view, and to justify it he said:

*... I think that generalising the notion of school autonomy and granting all schools greater autonomy is better than applying it gradually. Because if the school*

*principal, teachers, staff and students feel that shifting to decentralisation is just an experiment to test its success, they will not be enthusiastic about it, so it is best to generalise it from the beginning... (Nasir - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Because moving from centralisation to decentralisation and granting schools greater autonomy is a process of change, it is useful to discuss change theories. For example, Ralph Kilmann presented a model appropriate to the total system change approach, which would have five stages: (1) initiation of programme, (2) diagnosis of problem, (3) setting plan of action, (4) implementing the plan of action, and (5) evaluating results (Tripon & Dodu, 2005). This theory can be seen as a guide for managing the process of change. It is possible that change may have negative effects if the plans given are either not, or are poorly, prepared, or otherwise inappropriate for the context. Therefore, the gradual implementation of decentralisation will reduce losses and give a clear picture of the possibility of its application in all schools, or whether to stop and look for other solutions. Moreover, as shown in the literature, some of the research conducted to examine the impact of adopting decentralisation in the education system is on improving the quality of education (Galiani et al., 2002) which is one of the most important motives for adopting decentralisation. Hence, before generalising the implementation of decentralisation, it is essential to evaluate the performance of the target schools.

### **9.3.8 Incentives**

Four school principals and three educational experts revealed that incentives for principals and teachers are a key need for the implementation of autonomous schools. Principals would demand an increase in salary and to grant themselves incentives which they felt would suit their responsibilities; one principal said:

*... My salary is the same as that of the rest of the teachers and there is no advantage for me to be a principal. I need incentives to manage autonomous school because I will be responsible for each action... (Yosif - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Similarly, one principal claimed an increase in salary would act as an incentive:

*...incentives are essential for improving performance, principals and teachers demand to increase their salary... (Faisal - semi-structured interviews-1).*

Another participant also emphasised the need for incentives as a requirement for implementing school autonomy:

*...One of the most important needs for autonomous schools is incentives for principals and teachers... (Salah - semi-structured interviews-1).*

The participants pointed out that incentives are a source of strength that would encourage them to perform better, as an educational expert commented:

*...the incentives offered to the school principal encourage him to work hard and focus more on his job. It pushes him to fight for the accomplishment of the school. When his responsibilities and tasks increase, these incentives, whether financial or moral, are a source of strength for further sacrifice... (Hamad - semi-structured interviews-2).*

Another respondent indicated the importance of both incentives and sanctions for employees:



*...incentives reward and sanction are necessary for staff. I do not think principals will accept the leadership of autonomous schools without incentives... (Hassan - semi-structured interviews-2).*

The data suggest that incentives play a key role in improving the performance and the achievement of both school leaders and teachers, as based on a model of incentives and sanctions. The results also indicated that school principals currently have no incentives to motivate their performance. Thus, participants suggest that incentives for principals and teachers are fundamental to the implementation and maintenance of autonomous schools.

These results corroborate the ideas of the OECD study that targeted school leadership in order to reconsider the role of schools' leaders under increasing autonomy and a focus on school results. This study was conducted in a worldwide context between 2006 and 2008, and included the participation of Austria, Belgium, Australia, Finland, Denmark, Chile, Israel, Hungary, France, New Zealand, Ireland, Korea, The Netherlands, Portugal, Norway, the United Kingdom, Spain, Slovenia and Sweden. The findings that were reported focussed on certain matters, one of which was the role of incentives for improving school leadership. The findings of the OECD study also suggested that a lack of incentives is one of the factors that have been negatively influencing the motivation of highly qualified candidates. Therefore, this suggests that external incentives should be provided to attract candidates to lead schools. In addition, recruitment policies that are intended to make school leadership a more attractive profession should focus on improving and developing these incentives considering a national, regional and local context (Beatriz et al., 2008).

Here, several issues have been reported by the OECD study, one of which was that some countries provide support for in-depth training for mid-career principals, which is generally

not compulsory but rather linked to wage incentives. Second, governments, in association with local authorities, can develop incentives to ensure that school leaders themselves participate in national programmes, and encourage their contribution to improve quality. Third, the Nation Background Reports reveal that salaries are sometimes linked to the level of education, school size or school type, but only in a few cases are they related to school characteristics such as location or the socioeconomic environment. Therefore, flexible salaries can provide incentives for school principals to choose to work, for example, in difficult locations or disadvantaged schools (Beatriz et al., 2008).

The current study results support the idea expressed by Beatriz et al. (2008), in that high-quality leadership requires recognition through incentives and rewards, as well as appropriate support structures. Also, it confirms the view of Hanushek and Woessmann (2007), namely that school autonomy is one of the most significant incentives in its effect on learning outcomes. It is significant that “the devolution of responsibilities comes with provisions for new models of more distributed leadership, new types of training and development for school leadership and appropriate support and incentives” (Beatriz et al., 2008, p. 43). For example, the Korean Background Report states that greater incentives should be offered to incentivise middle management to take on certain additional roles (Kim, Kim, Kim & Kim, 2007).

Although one could anticipate differences between the interview responses of principals working in Riyadh and Sabya in relation to the additional support and professional development that school principals require for the successful implementation of school autonomy, there were no significant differences between principals’ responses from each of the two cities. They showed almost unanimous agreement in all key issues such as accountability, training and the gradual implementation discussed in this chapter.

## 9.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented quantitative and qualitative data related to RQ5. The results revealed that there are several essential needs for shifting to decentralisation and granting schools greater autonomy. Although participants did not entirely agree on the approach to implementation, they stressed the importance of proper preparation to avoid any unfortunate consequences. The following chapter will discuss the impact of the current centralised educational system on school principals' management role and their readiness for greater autonomy in Saudi Arabia from the current study results, and three main perspectives: decision making, autonomy and accountability, and will connect these issues to the literature. It will also explore the expected challenges and key needs of shifting to decentralisation in schools.

## **Chapter 10: Conclusion**

### **10.1 Introduction**

The thesis has investigated the possibility of implementing school autonomy by granting schools greater autonomy. This chapter briefly aims to summarise the research and highlight the key findings through six sections. First, the main objective, research RQs and key findings are presented. The second section reveals the original contributions. The third section identifies some of the limitations of the study. The fourth and fifth sections discuss the research implications for theory and practice, whilst the sixth suggests possible further research. The seventh section provides recommendations arising from the study. Finally, some reflections on the research journey are highlighted.

### **10.2 Summary of the study**

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived impact of the current educational system on school principals' management roles and their readiness for greater autonomy in Saudi Arabia from three main perspectives: decision making, autonomy and accountability.

#### **Theme 1: Current challenges**

The first research question was: What are the main challenges currently facing school principals in the KSA? The key findings extracted from the survey and interviews with principals and educational experts related to this question were as follows.

The results revealed that the majority principals reported excessive workload and a lack of authority to make decisions as being amongst the main challenges that made their duties difficult to achieve and as well as having a significant negative impact on their school's performance. It is evident that the authority currently granted to school principals is insufficient, which is in line with the findings of Alhumaidhi (2013) and Khalil & Karim (2016). In addition, in line with Alsayqh (1989), Alshihri (2005) and Alzaidi (2008), this study showed that the lack of authority over the majority of tasks leads, and indeed has led, to dissatisfaction among school principals.

In line with UNESCO's 2010 Global Monitoring Report (2010) and Alrushdan' (2005) study results, the findings highlighted that staff and teacher shortages are a significant barrier to good school performance. The participants indicated the inability to make important decisions in terms of, for instance, appointing new teachers and administrators. School principals stressed the fact that the cause of this matter is the central system, where only the Ministry of Education has the authority to employ teachers and staff; the school principal has no input into the decision making with regards to this issue. They were keen to be given the authority to hire teachers when needed because the shortage of such has a considerable influence on academic achievement.

The evidence collected for this study has also shown that principals felt neglected by officials and decision makers in the Ministry of Education and by the Departments of Education in the provinces. For example, the Ministry of Education teachers in these schools are engaged in decision making. They claim that involving them in the decision-making process has various positive influences such as increasing motivation towards the practice of their duties and

improving their performance. This finding broadly supports the work of other studies such as those by Al-Saud (2009) and Shabat (2015) regarding participation in decision making.

Consistent with various reports in the literature, such as Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011), Trimmer (2013), Bush (2008) and Lai-ngok (2004), this research found that the centralised system and bureaucracy is one of the current challenges that school principals face. The results indicate that the move to decentralisation may increase efficiency and free schools from the extensive bureaucracy of the centralised system.

One of the major findings regarding the current challenges that face principals was that school buildings have a large number of defects because their design needs to be improved and as a result of a general shortage of facilities, as well as some schools still being rented and poorly (if at all) prepared for education purposes, and the fact that students' safety has not been properly considered. These results are in line with Hannah (2013), namely that the school environment plays a vital role in students' achievement and in keeping them engaged.

In primary schools, it was clear to principals that continuous assessment, which is the only way to assess students' achievement from level one to level six, is a key challenge to principals because of the lack of implementation by teachers. They indicated that a relative lack of qualifications and training amongst teachers is the reason for this issue. These results are consistent with those of Abejehu (2016), Al-Jarjeer (2007), Al-Shehri (2006) and Alotabi (2014) in that teachers lacked the skills to implement continuous assessment because of a lack of training and a large number of students typically found in the classroom.

These findings also highlighted the importance of the impact of the lack of authority on the creativity of their job. School principals felt that their current circumstances represent a

considerable obstacle to creativity. The last challenge this study considered was the lack of motivation among teachers in terms of practising new teaching methods and improving their skills and performance. These findings further support those of Craft (2005), Zhang and Bartol (2010), Bosiok and Sad (2013) and Hirst et al. (2011), in that they indicated a significant correlation between empowerment and creativity.

These challenges that face school principals and their leadership are the result of the restrictions and limitations imposed as a fact of the centralised system. Thus, principals are looking forward to the greater autonomy that should help them to overcome these difficulties.

## **Theme 2: Principals' Readiness**

The second research question was: What are school principals' perceptions of their readiness to become more autonomous in relation to decision making? This question has been answered via the survey and interviews, where the survey was intended to explore the principals' capability to manage and plan, manage teachers, manage students, manage the curricula, and their communication and development abilities. The survey data showed that school principals were able to manage their schools independently, having focussed on their management and planning skills, dealing with students' issues and communication and development skills. However, they were less positive about their skills in terms of dealing with teacher issues and developing curricula.

The qualitative data also showed that principals had the ability to manage their schools autonomously. The themes raised through the analysis of the qualitative data focussed on principals' abilities in terms of setting plans and goals, decision making, teacher selection,

financial resources management, performance evaluation, raising student achievement and curriculum development. The study found that, generally speaking, the majority of principals felt that they had the capability to manage their schools autonomously and to practice the above skills in an effective manner. The findings highlighted the principals' confidence in setting plans and goals, making decisions, selecting teachers and managing financial resources. However, the study reported that principals felt less confident about conducting performance evaluations, raising student achievement and curriculum development.

These findings were supported by Abu Al-Ula's (2003) research, which found that the ability to make educational decisions is vital to the success of school management. In addition, these results are in line with Arcia et al. (2011), in that selecting teachers and staff is a major indicator of school autonomy. Moreover, the results further support the idea of Coelho (2009), that autonomy opens opportunities for school financing through charitable and local business sectors. Additionally, the results seem to be consistent with Hamilton (2015), in that giving school principals greater autonomy is essential to improving student attainment. Another set of research consistent with the current study findings was that reported by Greany and Waterhouse (2016) which highlighted the importance of professional leadership in ensuring curriculum innovation.

### **Theme 3: School Autonomy Opportunities**

The third research question was: What are school principals' perceptions of the opportunities that may arise with greater school autonomy in relation to decision making? The survey data has identified the influence of autonomy on students' creativity and results and on teaching development. In addition, almost all school principals felt that granting schools greater autonomy and applying sanctions and incentives would contribute to creating an atmosphere



of creativity and friendly competition between teachers and students. The findings also confirmed that giving schools greater autonomy would make the environment more attractive, raise the sense of responsibility and increase interaction in teaching.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that student achievements and the skills they would acquire would improve when schools were granted greater autonomy, particularly because participants believe that autonomy would give principals the authority to make their own decisions regarding operations related to the development of teaching methods and student achievement. This finding broadly supports the ideas expressed by Hanushek et al. (2013), namely that autonomy has a vital influence on student achievement. In addition, the results are consistent with the research of Paletta (2014), in that school autonomy has an associated impact on pupil attainment.

The second major finding was that shifting towards decentralisation and school autonomy would contribute to improving teachers' performance, mostly due to the idea that teachers would realise that the school principal would have the authority to dismiss those who were negligent in their duties; this would encourage them to improve their performance. Similarly, however, the principal would be able to reward teachers and staff who distinguished themselves. These results seem to be in line with the arguments presented by Patrinos and Fasih (2009), that granting schools greater autonomy pushes them to improve their performance. Moreover, the findings support the study of Higham and Earley (2013) which showed the possible increase in performance that could result from greater autonomy.

The third key finding was that it was felt that granting schools greater autonomy would help to improve the general school environment. In addition, school principals were ready to contribute to improving the school environment and facilities because granting them more

authority to manage the school budget would give them the chance to improve the school environment. Also, they would be able to build partnerships with community organisations to further develop school facilities. This finding seems to be consistent with the OECD (2012) research which found that decentralising educational funding to local authorities can increase responsiveness to local needs. On the other hand, the outcomes are contrary to those reported by Galiani et al. (2002), who found that schools located in poor areas performed better under centralisation in relation to financial management.

#### **Theme 4: Challenges to Implementation**

The fourth research question was: What are school principals' perceptions of the challenges they may face when implementing school autonomy in relation to decision making and accountability? This study has identified the fact that implementing school autonomy may face a number of challenges. The most obvious challenge was school buildings in terms of their design and facilities, while some participants indicated rental schools as an obstacle to its implementation. The investigation of school buildings has illustrated the link between their design and school performance because the current design will not help principals to achieve the objectives that are vital to school autonomy. These results support the ideas of Algarni & Male (2014) and Algarni & Male (2014), that school buildings which had not been prepared specifically for educational purposes did not meet the basic safety standards, and were not a comfortable environment for learners.

These findings also highlighted school principals' concerns regarding job security for teachers; they believed that putting decision-making power in the hands of school principals may reduce teachers' job security because poor performance would make a teacher vulnerable to

dismissal. This finding is consistent with that of Faremi (2017), which revealed a significant relationship between teacher turnover and job security in schools.

An interesting finding was the potential for school principals to misuse their authority because it is possible that personal and human relationships may lead to such issues. However, selecting qualified principals through clear and ethical criteria may help avoid such misuse of authority. Moreover, the existence of external accountability would ensure sure authority was not exploited under any circumstances. This outcome is contrary to that of Devas (2005), which indicated that decentralisation is linked with lower levels of corruption.

Another important finding of this study is that school autonomy may face both internal and external resistance. They pointed out that teachers might resist shifting to decentralisation because schools' principals would be able to make decisions without deferring to the Ministry of Education, which they may feel would threaten their jobs. In addition, the results of this study show that parents and the external community, in general, may resist the implementation of school autonomy for various reasons such as the nature of human resistance to change and the common culture of centralisation in most sectors in Saudi Arabia. This finding broadly supports the ideas of Yilmaz & Kilicoglu (2013), namely that organisation members often react to change efforts in a negative manner and will resist them. Also, in agreement with the results of Khan & Rehman (2008) which suggested that individual behaviour must be addressed in order to accept effective organisational change.

The research has also shown that finding qualified leaders was seen as a challenge for the implementation of school autonomy. These findings suggest that providing each autonomous school with a qualified leader can be seen as one of the major challenges to shifting to decentralisation and school autonomy. This is because leading school autonomy is a unique

task that requires well-qualified and skilled leaders. These results seem to be consistent with Mathis's (2010) research, which found that some of the school leaders are not qualified to do their assigned jobs. Also, in agreement with Karim (2014), the absence of the teaching of educational leadership in Saudi universities is the main reason for the weak qualifications of school leaders.

### **Theme 5: Requirements of Implementation**

The fifth research question was: What additional support and professional development do school principals require for the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA in relation to decision making and accountability? The study investigated the key requirements for the implementation of school autonomy. The survey focussed on the approaches to implementing decentralisation in education. Also, it has identified certain issues that should be considered, such as a gradual implementation, setting the criteria for selecting principals, establishing independent accountability, and raising awareness in the wider society.

While the themes emerging from the qualitative data were focussed on implementation, the most obvious need in shifting to decentralisation and the successful implementation of school autonomy is that of accountability. They also indicated that self-accountability is one of the factors that may determine the success of school principals. In addition, participants have discussed the question of "who will be held accountable?" in which they emphasised that accountability must be determined by an independent body, not by the Ministry of Education or some similar state organisation. This finding broadly supports the ideas of Damien (2011), who found that implementing educational accountability helped to improve the quality of education. Also, Gobby (2013) suggested that addressing the tools of accountability helps to improve school performance within a decentralised system.

The findings also highlighted the fact that the provision of adequate budgets and sufficient funding is a key requirement of the implementation of school autonomy. They reported that autonomous schools must diversify their sources of funding. Respondents also pointed out that external accountability, a financial management department and financial sustainability are essential factors for the implementation of school autonomy. These results further support the OECD (2012), in that balancing decentralisation, autonomy and accountability help to provide schools with resources and, indeed, to spend them properly. Moreover, financing is the cornerstone to dimensions such as decentralisation, autonomy and accountability.

Another important finding of this study is that setting appropriate criteria for selecting principals and teachers of autonomous schools is fundamental to school autonomy. For example, respondents highlighted decision-making ability as a key criterion for selecting autonomous schools' principals. In addition, a key result to emerge from this study related to the criteria for selecting principals is the extent of their enthusiasm toward school autonomy. These results are in line with the ideas expressed by Evers (1992), in that educational leaders must be subject to scrutiny. In addition, Mathis (2010) found that about a third of her sample became principals without the experience of being a vice principal. Consequently, setting proper criteria for selecting school principals is vital to implementing school autonomy.

The study also highlighted the need for training and preparing school principals and teachers appropriately because current training courses are unprofessional and clearly need more development. They require quality and continuity of training and building courses based on the needs of trainees. This finding is consistent with those of Ahmad and Abu-Alwafa (2011) and Abu Al-Ula (2003), in that the abilities of school leaders and their training are significant

factors in making proper decisions. Also, the outcomes are consistent with the argument of Mitgang (2012), in that leadership is among the most strongly influential factors on learning, which indicates that those holding the position of school principal require continuous high-quality training.

The investigation of school buildings has shown that autonomy will need school buildings to be properly prepared in terms of their design and facilities. They argued that modern buildings would help school principals to achieve their duties and support teachers to apply new teaching methods. These results have been linked to previous results in Theme 4: Challenges to Implementation because the current school buildings represent a challenge, and their preparation is a key requirement for implementing school autonomy.

An interesting finding was that it was suggested that the Ministry of Education should market the idea of school autonomy within the community and among parents and teachers. Moreover, decision makers and officials should clarify the importance of shifting to the decentralisation model and explain its role in educational development before implementation. This finding seems to be consistent with Coelho (2009), in that involving parents, teachers and local communities empowers them in relation to school management as a part of decentralisation. Consequently, marketing the notion of shifting to decentralisation in education is vital to ensuring the success of the implementation.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study was that moving to decentralisation should only be applied gradually. However, respondents argued the gradation of school autonomy from different perspectives and with different opinions as to the most suitable way to apply the new policy. Some of them suggested experimenting with autonomy in a small group of schools, while others preferred to grant school principals more

autonomy in some regards, whilst one school principal supported the generalisation of school autonomy from the very outset. A few school principals and educational experts suggested that offering incentives to principals and teachers is a key requirement for implementing autonomous schools. These results are in line with OECD research conducted between 2006 and 2008 which reported the vital role of appropriate incentives in improving school leadership. The research also found that a lack of incentives is one of the main factors to negatively influence the motivation of highly qualified candidates. In addition, recognition through incentives and rewards is important to attracting high-quality leadership (Beatriz et al., 2008).

### **10.3 Original contributions**

There are three key contributions made by this study.

First, this study has made a significant contribution in relation to the content. It has uncovered a new issue in the context of Saudi Arabia that has not been previously investigated: school principals in terms of their ability and readiness to lead their schools autonomously. It also offers insight into decentralisation policy and the kinds of opportunities and challenges that may arise. It has also highlighted the additional support that may be required, in order to ensure the successful implementation of school autonomy in the KSA.

Second, this study also has made an important contribution in relation to its methodology. In the context of Saudi Arabi, educational research considers the segregation of males and females appropriate, which means that female researchers conduct research in girls' schools and male researchers conduct research in boys' schools due to cultural and social considerations. However, the current study involves both male and female principals, at least

in the survey section, and accordingly, this study provides an original contribution by simultaneously investigating both genders in relation to school leadership in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the use of a mixed methods design also provides a contribution to the literature which has traditionally been dominated by survey research findings.

Third, this study has made a significant theoretical contribution by adopting a framework that explores the key concepts necessary to fully understand the problem under investigation (see Figure 4.1: The study's conceptual framework). By adopting this framework, it is claimed that this study has provided new theoretical insights into the notion of decentralisation and school autonomy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

#### **10.4 Limitations**

The limitations of this research project are as follows.

1. The first limitation is the non-generalisability of the study because of the nature of the qualitative investigation, in which this study targeted a small number of participants – 10 school principals and 5 educational experts – to gain detailed information via interview. In addition, the Saudi context in which this study was conducted differs from other contexts in relation to culture and infrastructure.
2. Some of the participants were only able to attend the interviews for a short time because of their busy schedules. However, this led me to focus more on related issues and manage the interview time carefully.
3. The study sample included both male and female principals in the survey; however, the interviews only include male principals for cultural reasons.



4. The study only targeted two categories: one within the school, the school principals, and one outside the schools, the educational experts; however, there were a number of related categories such as teachers, parents and high-level decision makers who were not involved.
5. This research would benefit from conducting interviews with a larger number of principals and officials in the Ministry of Education. However, as this was the work of only one researcher, the limited time and resources for this research project made it difficult to include additional participants.
6. Another limitation is the lack of any available and/or accessible database dealing with Arabic research, theses and journal articles that consider autonomy.

### **10.5 Implications for theory**

It is understood that the findings of this study cannot be generalised because of the small sample size and the context of the study; however, it is hoped that these findings may provide insights into, and a better understanding of, school autonomy and help researchers when considering similar contexts. This study builds on the literature that relates to school autonomy and educational reform in the global and local context in order to place the local context within the global. The perspective of educational reform would be best investigated from the perspectives of practitioners, namely school principals. In addition, this research presented a conceptual framework through decision making, independence, and accounting in the light of globalisation and the role of decentralisation in educational reform. In addition, school autonomy was studied through educational factors such as school principals, teachers, buildings and budgets. Also, the results confirmed that resistance to change within and

without schools is possible as a natural reaction by teachers and parents. This may help to predict the reactions of all individuals involved in the change process.

It is hoped that a more thorough understanding of school management needs may be useful to policy makers, officials and researchers in the Ministry of Education. The study may be used to inform principals of the nature of decision making in autonomous schools. Change, especially in the field of education, still requires considerable study before the associated change is enacted, and try to predict its implications. This is what the current study tried to achieve by recognising the interrelationships and interdependencies between the various parts of the school system throughout the change process and when moving to decentralisation, and also by studying the connection of the concepts of the study decision making, autonomy, and accountability to globalisation through tools such as neoliberalism and the knowledge economy, and finally in how decentralisation may play a crucial role in reforming education in terms of these factors. Therefore, this argument might add a new conceptual framework for educational reform. Moreover, the results revealed that decision making is related to all processes within the school in relation to teachers, school buildings, students, evaluation and development. This confirmed that centralisation represents an obstacle facing school principals in terms of dealing with all the above elements.

## **10.6 Implications for practice**

The findings of this research are very important in terms of forming a picture of the real-world situation in school management with regards to decision making and its link to the centralised system. It was useful to investigate giving principals greater autonomy because they are the stakeholders in such a change. In this study, school principals reported the key challenges

affecting their practice and their readiness to lead autonomous schools. In addition, in terms of the process of change in schools, it would be useful to involve principals and teachers because including the practitioners' opinions is useful in any context.

The findings inform interested parties as to the link between the readiness of principals, teachers, buildings and parents and of the successful implementation of school autonomy. Thus, it suggests that before implementing any changes that the preparation of training centres and the selection of professional trainers are important. Also, leading autonomous schools needs skilled principals who know how to use their authority and raise school performance. The findings of this study carry several implications when implementing school autonomy, as follows:

- Empowering school principals and giving them more authority may increase their level of performance and their sense of independence, as well as meeting their psychological need for self-esteem according to Maslow's hierarchy because, as mentioned previously, they feel neglected in the absence of the authority that affects their performance and their desire to continue in these positions. In addition, teachers' and students' confidence in the school leader may affect their performance, because high levels of confidence in their leader may have the greatest impact on the acceptance of their instructions.
- The existence of the School Board of Trustees in the autonomous schools that includes parents and educational experts may help the school to make decisions and solve problems quickly and appropriately.
- The board of school autonomy may provide the school with the needs of teachers and staff. This may undoubtedly allow the school principal to delegate tasks to specialists in which he/she finds the time to prepare and develop plans and assess the associated

performance, as in the current central system principals complain about the large number of tasks that distracts them from their duties because of the shortage of staff and teachers.

- As noted above, school principals complain that there is no incentive for them to continue with their jobs. Some of the participants believe that giving them the authority to run schools autonomously is one of the most important incentives they could be offered. In addition, under a decentralised system, incentives are based on performance and results, which make schools more competitive.
- Granting principals greater autonomy may help them to overcome school building difficulties.
- Continuous assessment is one of the existing challenges that face primary schools' principals. However, the school autonomy might be able to develop the continuous assessment technique via training the teachers and raising the awareness of parents. As stated earlier, continuous assessment is a practical method in many developed countries, but the existing weakness in schools in KSA is because of the lack of implementation. The following section outlines the recommendations for future research.

## **10.7 Further research**

There are five main areas for future research. First, the interviews conducted as part of this research were with male participants and their perceptions of principals' readiness to lead autonomous schools. I suggest that future research should investigate female principals regarding the same issue because professional women in Saudi Arabia face many different challenges in the workplace compared to their male colleagues (Alsubaie & Jones, 2017). Thus, there is a need for an in-depth investigation to explore if female leaders face more and

different difficulties than male leaders. Second, this research considered readiness in terms of various factors such as principals, school buildings, teachers and curricula. I suggest that future research could focus on each of these issues separately and investigate them in greater depth. For example, the impact of autonomy on teacher performance, on improving the school environment, and so on. Third, this research investigated the way in which to shift to decentralisation; however, there is clearly a need for more in-depth investigation of the optimal approaches by which to grant schools greater autonomy. Future research might investigate the potential advantages of the decentralised education system in Saudi Arabia in terms of teacher performance, student achievement and the school environment. In addition, there is a need to conduct a study about the impact of decentralisation on education in terms of reducing budgets. Fourth, since the Saudi government is seriously considering the privatisation of education, as well as the implementation of school autonomy, I believe it would be useful to conduct a comparative study between the privatisation of education and school autonomy in terms of their individual advantages and disadvantages. Finally, it would be useful to conduct a study on school leaders' training needs in further detail with regards to planning, decision making, evaluation of skills and problem solving.

## **10.8 Recommendations**

Considering the findings, this study will conclude by making several recommendations:

- It is proposed that school autonomy should be gradually implemented, and should be granted with respect to the management of financial resources in its first stage. The second stage would be to grant autonomy in the selection and employment of teachers. Each stage should be fully assessed before continuing the process.

- It is significant that policy makers should involve principals and teachers in educational development plans and consider their views and perceptions because they are, ultimately, the practitioners whose experiences best qualify them to add valuable ideas and make valuable contributions.
- Education reforms must be based on research to avoid their ultimate failure. There is a new movement in education toward evidence-based reform (Slavin & Lake, 2008).
- The implementation of school autonomy in Saudi Arabia should consider the global models of autonomy and thus attempt to design a suitable model for the Saudi context.
- Accountability is a key component in the success of, and achieving quality in, education in developed countries (Damien, 2011); therefore, whether school autonomy is implemented or otherwise, the existence of independent accountability is important in reforming education.
- The current study and the literature have shown that centralisation delays decision making which consequently affects school performance; thus, the transition to decentralisation could facilitate decision making and the school principal's ability to effectively perform his/her role.
- Implementing school autonomy requires that the school infrastructure and environment are developed because as lack of preparation of school buildings may cause difficulties, as reported in the findings.
- There is a need to establish effective criteria for selecting school principals and granting them incentives according to their performance. This could be a preparatory step to assigning leaders for autonomous schools.
- Training programmes should be developed for principals and teachers according to their needs, and the Ministry of Education should involve them in determining the nature of the training courses.

- Since bureaucracy and routine procedures represent some of the principal challenges influencing decision making in schools, the Ministry of Education should eliminate such procedures to make communication with schools easier.
- In the instance where the government decides not to implement school autonomy and independent accountability, there is still the need to establish an accurate and effective system of accountability within the Ministry of Education whereby schools are accountable for ensuring positive results.

## 10.9 Reflection

Since I came to the UK, I learned a lot and have had many new experiences, but I will focus on two aspects of my academic journey. First, I have learned the English language, which has opened new horizons in my research skills and expanded my ability to reach as many scientific sources as possible. Second, I have learned extensive research skills during my doctoral studies with the help of my supervisors and through the training programmes provided. I have gained knowledge and academic skills such as critical thinking, critical reading and writing. Also, the skills required for the research process in terms of choosing the appropriate data collection method and conducting interviews with participants, analysing the data and using various apps that facilitated this stage, and finally writing up the findings, which was the most challenging part of my doctoral journey. However, the research journey has positively affected both my academic and professional life.

I have been through stages of frustration because of the many challenges faced in the course of my research, where I quickly realised that I needed to learn how to read and write critically. However, with the support of my supervisor, colleagues and through self-study I was able to

overcome these challenges, and could further identify my weaknesses and improve them, and attempt to understand the nature of the doctoral stage until this process become smoother over time. Throughout this journey, I have learned that the doctoral stage is full of difficulties, challenges, achievement and learning; however, the beginning of one's real productivity as the researcher is after the doctoral stage when the researcher has acquired the skills to conduct their own professional research efforts and provide a comprehensive picture of the research process. In the data collection phase and whilst interviewing school principals, I found that those individuals had an extreme desire to change and they appeared firm in their readiness to take responsibility for their schools. I realised that the researcher's conception of the research issue is not complete until the end of the doctoral stage. Therefore, as a researcher, I found that there were steps that should have been taken, but that seemed normal at the time.

During this study, which I started in September 2014, there has been a major development in the educational policy related to my study in Saudi Arabia, when in 2017 the Ministry of Education decided to implement school autonomy in a limited number of schools. This decision was extremely encouraging because I realised that my research issue is indeed of fundamental importance to officials and decision makers, and that we have a common concern. However, I have realised that shifting to a decentralised system in the field of education is not an easy step, but rather one that needs more careful and extended study.

### **10.10 Summary**

This research sought to identify the possibility of, and opportunities inherent to, shifting to decentralisation and implementing school autonomy in Saudi Arabia. The findings



demonstrated that school management currently faces various difficulties in terms of the lack of authority, decision making, the quality of school buildings and poor performance amongst teaching staff. School principals have shown their desire for school autonomy and their willingness to lead them. In addition, the findings revealed that implementing school autonomy requires the preparation of school infrastructure, providing budgets, training employees and independent accountability. It is hoped that providing these needs and the gradual application of autonomy in schools may ultimately contribute to educational reform.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Ethical approval

<p>This research will use a case study: mixed method both quantitative and qualitative via conducting a questionnaire and deep interview. The participants will be male and female schools' principals who are able provide approval by themselves as experienced professional. Approval will also be asked from the Ministry of Education to conduct the study. Moreover, the individual consent form will be sent to each participant to ensure that they accept being involved. It is expected that collecting data will be in two phases between November and May 2015.</p>	
<p>B: I consider that this project may have ethical implications that should be brought before the Institute's Ethics Committee.</p>	
<p>Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.</p>	
<p>Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. title of project</li> <li>2. purpose of project and its academic rationale</li> <li>3. brief description of methods and measurements</li> <li>4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria</li> <li>5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary)</li> <li>6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them.</li> <li>7. estimated start date and duration of project</li> </ol>	

C: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:

Note: a signature is required. Typed names are not acceptable.

I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm that ethical good practice will be followed within the project.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Print Name Husain Almalki Date 20/10/2015


STATEMENT OF ETHICAL APPROVAL FOR PROPOSALS SUBMITTED TO THE INSTITUTE ETHICS COMMITTEE

This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Print Name Andy Kempe Date 20.11.15  
(IoE Research Ethics Committee representative)\*

\* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.

## Appendix 2: Risk assessment

University of Reading Institute of Education Risk Assessment Form for Research Activities February 2014		
Select one: Staff project: <input type="checkbox"/> PGR project: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MA/UG project: <input type="checkbox"/>		
Name of applicant (s): Husain Almalki		
Title of project: <i>Principals' attitudes towards applying school autonomy in Saudi Arabia</i>		
Name of supervisor (for student projects): Professor Andy Goodwyn		
<b>A: Please complete the form below</b>		
Brief outline of Work/activity:	Individual interviews will be conducted with schools' principals. The audio will be recorded digitally.	
Where will data be collected?	Primary and Secondary schools	
Significant hazards:	Security and safety measures in schools are a priority for the Ministry of Education and schools themselves; <u>therefore</u> there are no expected risks during the study.	
Who might be exposed to hazards?	N/A	
Existing control measures:	The Health and Safety of schools' facilities falls within the responsibility and control of the Ministry of Education and Civil Defense.	
Are risks adequately controlled:	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	
If NO, list additional controls and actions required:	Additional controls	Action by:
<b>B: SIGNATURE OF APPLICANT:</b>		
I have read the <u>Health</u> and Safety booklet posted on Blackboard, and the guidelines overleaf. I have declared all relevant information regarding my proposed project and confirm risks have been adequately assessed and will be minimized as far as possible during the course of the project.		
Signed:	Print Name: Husain Almalki	Date: 17/11/2015
STATEMENT OF APPROVAL TO BE COMPLETED BY SUPERVISOR (FOR UG AND MA STUDENTS) OR BY IOE <u>ETHICS COMMITTEE</u> REPRESENTATIVE (FOR PGR AND STAFF RESEARCH).		
This project has been considered using agreed Institute procedures and is now approved.		
Signed:	Print Name Andy Kempe	Date 20.11.15
* A decision to allow a project to proceed is not an expert assessment of its content or of the possible risks involved in the investigation, nor does it detract in any way from the ultimate responsibility which students/investigators must themselves have for these matters. Approval is granted on the basis of the information declared by the applicant.		

## Appendix 3: Principals information sheet



Researcher: Mr Husain Almalki  
Email: h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk

Research Project: *Principals' attitudes towards applying  
school autonomy in Saudi Arabia*

Supervisor: Professor Andy Goodwyn  
Email: a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk

### **Participant information sheet**

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about applying school autonomy.

#### ***What is the term "school autonomy"?***

School autonomy is a form of school management in which schools are given decision-making authority over their operations, including the hiring and firing of personnel, and the assessment of teachers and pedagogical practices, as well as setting plans and managing budgets.

#### ***What is the study?***

The research which is entitled '*Principals' attitudes towards applying school autonomy in Saudi Arabia, A Case-Study of Education Institution in Saudi Arabia*' aims to measure Principals' attitudes towards applying school autonomy in Saudi to find out the possibilities of granting schools more freedom and power. Some believe that centralization and bureaucracy have influenced negatively on improving education, however, on the other hand, it will ensure that major elements of education such as principals, teachers and schools' environments are ready for change.

#### ***Why have I been chosen to take part?***

You have invited to take part in the study because I believe that you have relevant and valuable experience and vision about the role and position of head teachers. As well as this, you are the suitable candidate to give real answers to these questions. Hopefully, collecting valuable and rich data from principals may help to achieve the goals of the study.

#### ***Do I have to take part?***

Participation in the research is entirely voluntary. You may also withdraw at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you, by contacting the researcher using the details above.

#### ***What will happen if I take part?***

The study will be in two phases; a survey and an interview. This study intends to conduct personal interviews with a sample of principals who are involved in the survey. If you are happy to take part in the questionnaire and interview, you will be asked to fill in the concept form. The survey requires answering 52 questions divided into three sections about applying school autonomy in Saudi. It is estimated that this will take about 30 minutes. In the second phase, the interview will take between 40 minutes to 1 hour and you will be asked some questions about the same issues as in the survey. You have the right to withdraw at any time even after you have completed all the activities.

#### ***What are the risks and benefits of taking part?***

The data will remain confidential and will only be seen by the researcher and the supervisors. In both two cases your details and identity are protected and it will be used just for the purpose of this research and you will retain your anonymity.

Participants in similar studies have found it interesting and useful to be involved. We anticipate that the findings of the study will be useful for decision makers in the future to make the right decisions about granting schools more power, because if schools and all staff are not ready for this change the results will be counterproductive.





***What will happen to the data?***

All data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. There is no need to provide us with your identity except if you desire to be involved in the interview. No identifiers linking you to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. In both two cases your details and identity are protected and it will be used just for the purpose of this research and you will retain your anonymity. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the researcher and supervisors will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up. The results of the study will be presented in my dissertation and possibly in subsequent academic publications and national and international conferences. If you would like to be informed of the results of the study, please contact me, and you will be provided with them.

***What happens if I change my mind?***

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the research, you can stop completing the activities at any time. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, we will remove your data.

***Who has reviewed the study?***

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

***What happens if something goes wrong?***


In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact Professor Andy Goodwyn.  
Email: [a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk)

***Where can I get more information?***

If you would like more information, please contact Mr Husain Almalki  
Tel: 0504791574 / 00447453676491  
Email: [h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk](mailto:h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk)

I do hope that you will agree to take part in the study. If you do, please complete the attached consent form and return it to [h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk](mailto:h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk) as soon as possible.

## Appendix 4: Principals consent form

 <b>University of Reading</b>	<p>Researcher: Mr Husain Almalki Email: h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk</p> <p>Supervisor: Professor Andy Goodwyn Email: a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk</p>
<p><b>Research Project:</b> <i>Principals' attitudes towards applying school autonomy in Saudi Arabia</i></p>	
<p><b>Principals Consent Form</b></p>	
<p>I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.</p> <p>I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.</p>	
<p>Name of head teacher: _____</p> <p>Name of school: _____</p>	
<p>Please tick as appropriate:</p>	
<p>I consent to completing a questionnaire</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>I consent to be involved on the interview</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>What type of interview do you prefer?</p>	
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Face to Face    <input type="checkbox"/> by Telephone    <input type="checkbox"/> online by e.g. skype    <input type="checkbox"/> another type and add it below</p>	
<p>Signed: _____</p>	
<p>Date: _____</p>	

## Appendix 5: Permission statements to collect the data



### Institute of Education

4 Redlands Road  
London Road Campus  
Reading  
RG1 5EX

phone +44 (0)118 378 2601  
email [ioe@reading.ac.uk](mailto:ioe@reading.ac.uk)

### To whom it may concern

This letter is to confirm that my PhD student Husain Almalki has my full permission and support to conduct a research study for his doctoral thesis. The focus of his research is on the attitudes of state schools' principals about applying school autonomy model in Saudi Arabia, and the data collection will be from 15/4/2016 till 12/7/2016. He has observed all ethical procedures and is fully supported by The University of Reading, Graduate School.

If there are any issues or concerns please contact me,

Yours faithfully

Professor Andy Goodwyn  
[a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk)

March 10th 2016





## **Appendix 6: Statement of completing the data collection**

## Appendix 7: The survey



**Research Project:** *School Leaders' Experiences and Perceptions of School Reform in KSA: Autonomy, Accountability and Decision Making*

Researcher: Mr Husain Almalki  
Email: h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk

Supervisor: Professor Andy Goodwyn  
Email: a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk

### The survey

The survey is set out in the following way four sections; (A) personal details, (B) principals' ability to manage and plan (C) the impact of granting schools greater autonomy and (D) the methods of implementing decentralisation in education. In addition, there are comment boxes at the end of sections for adding more of your opinion, should you wish to do so. This division exists in order to find out the appropriate answer and facilitate questions.

#### Section A: Personal details

1. Gender:

Male

Female

☐☐

2. Age range (years):

☐☐☐☐

20-29

30-39

40-49

50-60

3. Number of years in teaching:

☐☐☐☐

First year

2-4

5-9

10+

4. Number of years in being a principal:

☐☐☐☐

First year

2-4

5-9

10+

5. What type of school?

☐☐☐☐

Primary school

Secondary school

High school

secondary and high school

6. What is your main teaching subject?

7. What is your highest qualification?

8. Do you like being a principal? Why?

### Section B: Principals' ability to manage and plan

No	The theme	The principal is able to	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
1	Management and Planning skills	Identify strengths and weaknesses					
2		Set priorities					
3		Determine equipment and human needs					
4		Evaluate the performance of the school					
5		Make good decisions					
6		Set the budget and spend it appropriately					
7		Develop educational goals					
8	Teachers' issues	Identify training needs and deliver appropriate CPD for teachers					
9		Select teachers according to specific criteria					
10		Devise appropriate rules, sanctions and incentives for teachers					
11		Appoint teachers and dismiss them according to school need					
12	Students' issues	Support the ideas of innovation from students					
13		Set the solutions for lacks in academic achievement					
14		Make balance between using technology and direct connection between students and teachers					
15		Provide learners with various sources of information					
16	Curriculum' issues	Use modern methods to achieve curriculum objectives					
17		Identify the strength and weakness in the curricula through specialist teams					
18		Lead specialist teams to evaluate the curriculum					
19		Lead the specialist teams to build a suitable curriculum					
20	Communication and development skills	Build relationships with external organizations					
21		Balance between importing useful ideas and hold values of society					
22		Keep pace with digital developments and the information revolution					
23		Build partnerships with specialized educational providers to improve the curriculum					



**Section C: The impact of granting schools greater autonomy.**

No	Themes	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
24	The existence of sanctions and incentives will contribute to creating an atmosphere of creativity and competition					
25	Managing the maintenance of school buildings by school management will make the environment more attractive					
26	Granting schools more authority will raise the sense of responsibility					
27	Teachers' participation in the development of the curriculum will contribute to enrich and increase interaction in teaching					
28	Granting principals greater autonomy will give them more confidence, which contributes to improve the school performance					
29	Granting school more authority will contribute to improve students' results					

Do you think there are Important issues missing here linked with the role of applying school autonomy on improving of education? What are they?

For adding your comments:

#### **Section D: The methods of implementing decentralisation in education**

No	Themes	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
30	Granting schools greater autonomy should be applied gradually					
31	The sudden transition from centralisation to Decentralisation may cause a negative impact					
32	Establish independent accountability organizations is necessary for autonomy in schools					
33	Specific criteria should be set for selecting principals					
34	Parents are a key factor for school autonomy successful					
35	Raising the awareness of society will help to support Decentralisation					
36	Applying Decentralisation in other sectors in the country will be useful for applying it in education					

Do you think there are Important issues missing here linked with the methods of implementing decentralisation in education? What are they?

For adding your comments:

## Appendix 8: Initial interview questions (phase one) with principals



University of  
Reading

Researcher: Mr. Husain Al Malki  
Email: h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk

Research Project: *Principals' attitudes towards applying*

Supervisor: Professor Andy Goodwyn  
Email: a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk

*school autonomy in Saudi Arabia*

### Interview questions phase (1):

1. Do you think that the school's principal is able to manage the big issues such as setting goals, priorities, budget and designing a suitable curriculum?
2. What is your opinion about the ability of the school's principal to make good decisions with regard to selecting and appointing teachers and also dismissing them?
3. Do you think that school's principal can evaluate teachers' performance according to specific criteria? How?
4. Do you think that school's principal is able to find solutions to the problems related to school management once there is more autonomy? How?
5. Do you think that school principals are ready for leading school autonomy?
6. Do you think that school's principal and his/her team are able to apply the expected necessary criteria of managing a more autonomous school?
7. Applying school autonomy will support the innovation and creativity of students, what is your perspective?
8. Do you think that giving the power to the school's principal hand will improve the performance of teachers and all staff? Why?
9. Do you think that granting school's principal the authority to manage the budget will improve the environment of the school? How?
10. Granting school management more power will also raise the level of sense of responsibility, what is your opinion?
11. From your experience, do you think that applying school autonomy will improve education processes and results? How?
12. What are the expected barriers and difficulties that might face implementing school autonomy?
13. Some believe that the social context is not suitable for applying school autonomy, what do you think?
14. Do you think that schools' principals need new training? Why?
15. What the other requirements for the implementation?
16. Do you want to add any comments related to this subject?

## Appendix 9: Initial interview questions (phase two) with educational experts



Research Project: *Principals' attitudes towards applying  
school autonomy in Saudi Arabia*

Researcher: Mr Husain Almalki  
Email: h.j.h.almalki@pgr.reading.ac.uk

Supervisor: Professor Andy Goodwyn  
Email: a.c.goodwyn@reading.ac.uk

### Interview questions phase (2):

1. Do you agree with the initial survey results?
2. Do you agree with implementing of school autonomy?
3. What are the expected barriers and difficulties that might face implementing school autonomy?
4. How can we overcome them?
5. To what extent the current factors such as principals teachers and buildings are ready for the implementing?
6. What the requirements for the implementation?
7. do you think that applying school autonomy will improve education operations and results? How?
8. What is your opinion of the way of implementation?
9. Do you want to add any comments related to this subject?

## Appendix 10: Example of translating interviews from Arabic to English

TITLE: *Principals' perceptions towards applying school autonomy in Saudi Arabia*

The interview with principals- phase one



السؤال الأول: هل تعتقد أن مدير المدرسة قادر على إدارة القضايا الكبرى كرسم الأهداف وبناء المنهج مع فرق عمل متخصصة وتحديد الأولويات؟

Q1: Do you think that the school's principal is able to manage the big issues such as setting goals, priorities, budget and designing a suitable curriculum?

لدي القدرة على اتخاذ القرارات الصحيحة عندما يكون لدي السلطة والميزانيات المطلوبة بالإضافة إلى فريق عمل مؤهل يساعدي على اتخاذ قرارات دقيقة. ومع ذلك، أعتقد أن مديري المدارس بحاجة إلى تدريب مستمر أثناء الخدمة لتطوير مهارة صنع القرار.

*I have the ability to make good decisions when I have the authority and required budgets as well as a qualified staff that help me to make accurate decisions. However, I think that principals need continuous in-service training for developing the skill of decision making.*

ما رأيك حول قدرة مدير المدرسة في اتخاذ القرارات السليمة فيما يتعلق باختيار وتعيين المعلمين والاستغناء عنهم؟

Q2: What is your opinion about the ability of the school's principal to make good decisions with regard to selecting and appointing teachers and also dismissing them?

يستطيع المديرون اختيار المعلمين. ومع ذلك، أنا ضد القرارات الفردية، ولا سيما فيما يتعلق بالقضايا الرئيسية. من الأفضل أن يكون لدى المدرسة مجلس إدارة ويتم اتخاذ جميع القرارات الرئيسية بشكل جماعي. يجب أن يأتي الاختيار من خلال معايير وإجراءات محددة.

*Principals can select teachers. However, I am against individual decisions, especially regarding main issues. It is better when the school has a board and all major decisions are made collectively. The selection should come through specific criteria and procedures.*

## Appendix 11: The initial coding of the interviews

### The initial coding of interview data analysis

Theme	Codes	Interview Phase (1)	Interview Phase (2)
Schools' principals' ability of	Setting plans and goals		
	Decision making		
	Financial resources management		
	Teachers' selection		
	Performance evaluation		
	Rising students' results		
	Curricula development		
Challenges of implementing school autonomy	Design of schools' buildings		
	Schools' facilities		
	Job security		
	Misuse the authority		
	The internal resistance to change		
	The external resistance to change		
	Qualified leaders		
	Rental buildings		
Needs of implementing school autonomy	Accountability		
	Budgets		
	Selection Criteria		
	Training		
	Preparing the school buildings		
	Marketing of decentralization idea		
	Gradation of implementation		
	The incentives		

Note (1): MAXQDA program is used for coding.

## Appendix 12: The initial coding of the survey opened questions

### The initial coding of the survey opened Qs data analysis

Theme	Codes	Survey opened Qs
The current challenges of school principals'	Plenty of tasks and lack of authority	
	Staff and teachers' shortages	
	Feeling neglected	
	Centralized system and bureaucracy	
	School buildings	
	Continuous assessment	
	Freedom and creativity	

Note (1): MAXQDA program is used for coding.