Devolving decision-making to private schools of the Sultanate of Oman: a practical exploration of challenges and potentials

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Abstract

This research explores the different perspectives of education stakeholders in respect of decision-making in Omani private schools, with the intention of improving such decision-making. Specifically, it investigates private schools' decision-making processes according to the current Ministry of Education (MOE) system. It also explores the perceived need to devolve decision-making authority from central to school level, as well as the potential outcomes of such change. It identifies the decision-making areas that could be decentralized to school level authority, and those areas that are too problematic or unacceptable to change. Finally, it proposes a model of devolved school-based decision-making.

This is a qualitative research study. In depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 93 purposefully selected participants, from both central and local level, who are all involved in decision-making affecting schools. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis and an inductive approach to draw out the findings of the research.

The research findings confirm that the current MOE system of decision-making is still highly centralized in Omani private schools, and indicates the complex and various decision-making constraints at school level. The study calls for gradual decision-making devolution to private school authority from the MOE in order to improve educational quality and school efficiency. However, the devolution process should run according to specific criteria and requirements in the Omani context. The results identify areas of student, staff and school affairs could be devolved to the schools' authority, and indicate specific areas relating to the estate management, curriculum and instruction that need to remain under central control. If private schools are granted decision-making authority, a School Board needs to be formed in every school in order to control a decentralized decision-making process. The study concludes by suggesting a strategy of devolving decision-making authority to Omani private schools, as well as offering some recommendations which would hopefully be implemented by the MOE and private schools.

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Chapter One: Study Introduction

1.1 Overview

The phenomenon of decentralization and devolving power from a central authority to school level emerged in the 1980s in most education systems around the world, especially in developed countries (Geo-Jaja, 2006; Turner, 2004; Zadja, 2006). Devolving decision making authority is a well-known reform theme which is implemented currently in many countries, but with a variation of aims, strategies and outputs (Cranston, 2001; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004; Hanson, 1998; McInerney, 2003). In order that schools are managed effectively, they are granted increased decision making autonomy in different aspects of school operation, such as budgeting, curriculum and resource management. However, the type and degree of decentralization and devolving the power of decision-making differ from one government to another. Some transfer the decision-making authority to school level in only one single area, while others allow schools to have decision-making powers in different domains. The premise of the devolution of decision-making is that granting schools more autonomy and accountability in management may drive them to become more productive and effective in delivering education.

There is a degree of assumption in the literature that the involvement of a school's members, together with stakeholders, in making a school's decisions will be more productive and effective (Barth, 1990; O'Donoghue & Dimmock, 1996; Fullan, 1993). Additionally, making changes to improve teaching and learning in schools, according to Cardno (1998), can be better planned collaboratively between the staff of the school and the stakeholders. Thus, the process of making schools' decisions might be more successfully achieved locally rather than centrally.

Oman is one of the developing countries in which government intervention is highly centralized. All educational institutions' policies and programs are created by the government. Oman has witnessed significant and rapid change in its educational system since 1970 with the aim of enhancing the quality of education provided to its citizens. The Omani government encourages private schools to share the responsibility of diversifying educational opportunities and addressing the needs of people. These schools are governed, regulated, supervised and evaluated centrally by the MOE. However, its centralized system hinders these schools when it comes to making their own decisions in key areas. Hence, centralized decision-making may create many difficulties for private schools and prevent them from creating any innovations to develop their schools (Brown, 1991). Accordingly, it can be argued that they might be

unable to be responsive to the needs of parents, students and the local community, as well as their employees; and thus, they may lose trust in providing education quality. Also, they may not be able to meet the requirements of the international educational institutions that they are accredited to. Consequently, the MOE needs to review its top-down system in making private schools' decisions and find a more convenient strategy to enhance change and improvement in private schools.

One such strategy is devolving the decision-making to the authority of private schools.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Since 1970, significant development has been introduced in the Omani educational system. Different educational reforms have been implemented by the MOE in order to keep up with rapid economic, social and cultural developments in the country. Although the focus of change between 1970 and 2000 was on restructuring and quality, there was more of a concern with physical structure (building schools and providing equipment) than with the process of improving the schools' work. Additionally, the idea of involving schools in decision-making processes has received little attention during this period (Al-Adawi, 2004; Al-Kitani, 2002).

However in 2006, the MOE introduced a new educational reform in public schools by implementing the school-based management approach. The Ministry started to decentralize some authority and function gradually to school level in selected public schools, including administration and financial issues, students and supervision affairs, school exams and activities, and maintenance and services affairs (MOE, 2006a; MOE & WB, 2013). However, central interference is still practised by the MOE which restricts schools in the process of decision-making autonomy (Al-Ghefeili, 2014).

Private schooling in Oman is an important part of the Omani education system, and is considered as both parallel and complementary to public schooling. Unlike public schools, Omani private schools are established, owned, funded, and run privately by Omani individuals, companies or institutions. They charge fees to Omani and non-Omani students for their education. They are also managed privately, but are supervised by the MOE technically and administratively, according to central policies and regulations (Al-Abri, 2009; MOE, 2006b).

Omani private schools have full autonomy in their financial affairs without the Ministry's intervention, as they are privately financed. They are also granted limited autonomy to make decisions in some areas; however, they are not allowed to implement any decisions without the Ministry's permission, according to the Policy Document of Private Schools (MOE, 2006b). For example, they have full autonomy to select their

staff, but cannot appoint them without obtaining final approval from the Ministry. Hence, the decision-making authority to decide on staff appointments is only partially devolved. Consequently, private school management faces difficulties to develop their schools and provide the quality of education according to the developing needs of parents and labour market requirements. From international perspectives, the literature suggests that the involvement of the school's staff and stakeholders in decentralized decision-making process is an important factor for improving school effectiveness (Caldwell, 2004; Hargreaves, 1994, Fullan, 1991). Oman could benefit from such policy by transferring decision-making power in specific aspects to school level, depends on its cultural perspectives, which needs to be studied.

Furthermore, many researchers indicate that little attention has been dedicated to studying the devolution of decision-making. Adolphine (2008), Duke (2005), Kim (2005), Nielsen, (2007) and Somech (2002) pointed out that further studies are needed to investigate decision-making authorities and practices at school level, especially from the perception of head teachers, who face difficulties in maximising educational quality when their range of decision-making is restricted. Additionally, Cranston (2001) indicated that it is important to study the role of the local community widely. Carr-Hil, Rolleston and Schendel (2016) suggested future studies be conducted qualitatively on school-based decision-making in general, and particularly an analysis of the positive and negative impacts of devolving decision-making power to school level. Al Ghafli and Al Humaidi (2013) recommended further research in the participation of school principals in decision-making at central level.

In the Omani context, Al-Ghefeili, Hoque and Othman (2013) assert that schools' administration autonomy in decision-making has not been studied in Oman, and that there is a shortage of relevant empirical studies in the area that clearly report on the roles and practices of school management in decision-making. Additionally, Al-Ghefeili (2014) recommended further studies be conducted to examine the impact of devolving decision-making authority to school level. Moreover, the examination of decision-making authority in Omani private schooling, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has not been explored yet, although there are few studies investigating the implementation of the school-based management approach in public schools. Therefore, there is a gap here that this research aims to fill.

1.3 Aims of the study

The main objective of the study is to explore different perspectives on devolving decision-making authority in Omani private schools for the purpose of improving the decision-making quality in these schools. It also has the following specific aims:

1- Investigating current views about private schools' decision-making authority according to the current MOE system or regulations and revealing the constraints and difficulties in making decisions within this system.

2- Exploring whether there is a need to devolve decision-making authority from central to school level or not, and identifying the expected outcomes of such change.

3- Identifying the areas in which the authority of decision-making could be devolved to school level.

4- Proposing a potential model or strategy of school-based decision-making.

1.4 Research questions

The research aims to answer the following four key questions from contextual and international perspectives:

1- What is the MOE's policy in making private schools' decisions, and to what extent this system is centralized or decentralized, and why?

The aim of this question is to investigate who currently has the authority to make private schools' decisions, and to explore to what extent this system is centralized or decentralized, and the reasons behind it. It will also investigate whether or not private schools face constraints in making decisions within the MOE system.

2- From contextual and international perspectives, what are the effects, either positive or negative, of devolving decision-making to private schools' authority?

This research question will explore whether there is a need to devolve the power of decision-making from central to school level or not. It will also identify the rationale behind this decentralised reform by investigating the positive or negative consequences of decision-making being devolved to private schools' authority.

3- What are the decision-making areas that could be devolved to private schools' authority? and why?

The purpose of this question is to identify the areas that could or could not be decentralized at school level, and the reasons behind this from the perspective

of the Ministry within its policy and actions to reform the Omani education system, and from the different international perspective of private school's employees. Specific key areas will be questioned that are related to school buildings, student and staff affairs, curriculum, and general administrative decisions such as school activities and calendar.

4- If decision making authority is devolved to Omani private schools, which model of school-based management is suitable and could be implemented, and how?

Benefiting from the international perspectives, this research question will identify the people that should participate in the decision-making process at school level, and investigate whether they need training or not. It will also explore suitable ways in which they can be involved in making these decisions. On this basis, a convenient decentralized decision-making model will be proposed to be applied for making private schools' decisions. It will also identify how to devolve the power of making decisions from central to school level.

These research questions raise important issues concerning with education transfer and policy borrowing in school management and how can be adapted to Omani education system.

1.5 The researcher's motivation for this study

This study has actively engaged the researcher as little attention has been paid to private school issues, despite many recent initiatives undertaken within the MOE. The driving force behind his decision to explore and evaluate in greater depth the decision-making authority of Omani private schooling is the direct result of the insights that he gained through various meetings conducted with Omani private school staff and parents, as he worked as Head of Sections and Director in various different departments in the Private Schools Directorate at the central MOE for more than 15 years. Private school owners and principals constantly complain about the difficulties they face from the centralized education system of the MOE when they want to implement any decisions. The researcher observed and heard critiques of the Ministry's regulations on how private school decisions are made. Additionally, they regularly demand the Ministry change its intense procedures and routine practices in decision-making. They are concerned about when and where the Ministry grants them trust and authority in making decisions for their school. The researcher shared this concern, and often could not find explanations for the inconsistent decisions that the Ministry made for some private schools. It was difficult for him to reply to some of the

queries made by various private school staff and stakeholders about why such decisions were made, and why such flexibility was granted to some schools and not to others. Therefore, all of these issues initiated the researcher's interested in investigating decision-making authority in private schools.

Furthermore, this study was conducted for the following reasons. First, one of the recommendations arising from several Omani private school conferences and symposiums, and from annual meetings with school owners, is the need to provide more autonomy for private schools in making decisions (Al-Rehali, 2015; MOE, 2003; Salwaa, 2013). Second, Omani private schools are the sole provider for pre-school education in the country and there are demands for enrolments at pre-school level to be increased (UNICEF, 2000, 2005). Third, this is a response to the national direction of the development of education, in particular, the "Education for All" plan which concerns the future development of education, inclusive of the encouragement of private education expansion at all levels (MOE, 2004).

1.6 Study structure

This research is structured in seven chapters, including this introduction that ends with an outline of the study structure. Chapter Two will present the research context. Initially, it will provide an overview description of the Sultanate of Oman, including its geographical, demographic, economic and political features. Chapter Two will also provide a detailed description of the context of the Omani education system with more focus on Omani private schools, and reference to the management and authority of decision-making.

Chapter Three will discuss the theoretical basis of the study. It will review the general literature concerned with centralization and decentralization in the education system with more focus on the devolution of decision-making authority. Additionally, the school-based management (SBM), particularly its type and models, will be explained. Also, some studies of the devolution of decision-making will be outlined. This chapter will conclude by explaining change management and its importance in education with more focus on the resistance to change, its causes and overcoming such resistance.

The fourth chapter of the study will describe the research methodology. It will explain the research paradigm, the piloting stage, the data collection method and recording, quality issues, sampling and participants, and ethical consideration.

Chapter Five will report the findings of the data analysis that emerged from the interviews. Chapter Six will discuss the results of the data collection and present the significant themes emerging from the data. The final chapter will summarize the main

findings of the study and outline its implications and recommendations, and suggest a strategy of devolving decision-making. It will also present the research's contribution and limitations. Further studies and the personal reflection of the researcher will be provided at the end of the chapter.

Chapter Two: Research Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to set the scene of the study by giving a clear picture of the Sultanate of Oman and its education system. It provides an overview of Oman, with detailed descriptions of its geographical, demographic, economic and political features. It then briefly discusses the development of the Omani education system and its management and organization with more emphasis on the context of private schools. The information presented in this chapter is important to make clear the challenges and facts that influence the Omani education system.

2.2 The Sultanate of Oman: an overview

Oman is an Islamic, Arab, Gulf and youthful developing country, ruled by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said. It is a "hereditary monarchy, an independent country, and a fully sovereign Sultanate" (Al-Abri, 2016, p.11). The official religion of the country is Islam, and Arabic is the official language. The Sultanate of Oman is a secure and peaceful state which has a stable foreign policy and good foreign relations and friendships with various other countries around the World (Kechichian, 1995; MOI, 2014; Owtram, 2004; Peterson, 2004; Valeri, 2007). Cecil (2006) describes Oman as "tolerant of other religions and customs, and unthreatened by internal conflicts" (p.60). Since 1970 the country has witnessed rapid development in all its systems with more of a concentration in the education and health provisions, which have been developed quantitatively and qualitatively. The following sections provide detailed descriptions of Oman.

2.2.1 Geographical and demographic features

The Sultanate of Oman is situated on the Tropic of Cancer and is the gateway between the Arabian Gulf, the Indian Ocean and East Africa. Lying in the south-eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula, Oman has played a significant role in establishing and maintaining strong relations with ancient civilizations around the world. It shares with its neighbouring countries at least one cultural, historical, economic, religious or linguistic (Arabic) relationships. Also, this strategic location has ensured that Oman has been in a position historically to dominate regional commercial trading (Al-Abri, 2016; CIA, 2015; Joyce, 1995; MOI, 2014; Riphenburg, 1998). Additionally, Common (2011) points out that the unique features of Omani geography has created diversity within its districts, in its population characteristics and local cultures. Each area has different cultural and economic trends. Moreover, as Oman is characterized by geographical diversity, it is split into 11 administrative governorates: Muscat, Dhofar, Batinah North,

Batinah South, Sharqiyah North, Sharqiyah South, Dakhiliyah, Dhahirah, Buraimi, Wusta and Musandam, which are sub-divided into smaller districts (61 wilayats). Each governorate has a separate local education authority, known as the Directorate General of Education, which reports centrally to the MOE. Furthermore, each district has multi-tribes, different Islamic sects - *Ibadi*, *Sunni* and *Shia*, and other religions which create cultural diversity in Omani society. Because of this diversity, other languages, such as English, Swahili, Urdu and Baluchi are spoken in the country, besides Arabic (Al-Lamky, 2007; Common, 2011; Peterson, 2004; Valeri, 2007). Additionally, the Islamic values as well as cultural and civilizational diversity are considered as the Omani identity, besides Omani customs and traditions. Peace, tolerance, hospitality, politeness and non-sectarianism are some examples of Omani identity (Jones & Ridout, 2012).

Demographically, Oman's population is estimated at 2,773,479, according to the latest census in 2010, made up of 1,957,336 Omanis, and the rest being expatriates, which comprise about 30% of the total of population. The Muscat governorate has the highest number of people at 775,878. The census's figures also indicate that the majority of the population is under the age of 18; thus, Oman is a young country (NCSI, 2014). Figures are set to grow annually. According to the World Bank report (2013), the rate of annual population growth of Oman was 9.1% in 2013, whereas it was 5.1% in 2010. It is considered as a country with one of the highest birth rates. Accordingly, it could be argued that the rapid growth in Omani's young population is a challenge for the country (Katz, 2004) in providing education and its management.

Therefore, these geographical and demographic features present challenges to the MOE in schooling provision to these different regions. For example, there are remote areas in the mountains and deserts, such as Wusta, where less people live and have a nomadic lifestyle which makes education services more difficult to obtain, while it is easier for the Ministry to provide education in other, more populated regions, such as Muscat and Batinah. More educational facilities are required, which in turn demand much finance. Hence, this may influence on the school resource management in different areas. However, it raises the question of which education system is appropriate to be applied for managing schools effectively? Should this be a centralized or decentralized system? And according to what criteria? For instance, making reform in the Islamic Education and the Social Studies curriculum might be encountered with resistance from some Omani citizens, particularly in the inland regions, as they are characterized as conservative people (Barakat, 1993). This is not unusual as the Islamic religion works as a cohesive and constructive force in many everyday details, as well there being a fear of losing their social identity. Thus, any new

change might be resisted, especially if it could negatively affect the Islamic, cultural and national identity.

2.2.2 Economic features

Depending on oil and gas revenues, Oman is classified by the World Bank as a high-income state. The official statistics show that gas and oil account for 71% of government revenues (MOF, 2016). They contribute approximately 50% to its gross domestic product (GDP), which was USD 15,550 (GBP 12,397) per capita in 2015 (World Bank (WB), 2015).

The economic infrastructure started in Oman after setting the development strategy which contains a sequence of five-year plans, setting out the aims for all government sectors, including education (Riphenburg, 1998; Owtram, 2004). These plans are created centrally. Al-Abri (2016) states, "the production of five year plans is also indicative of Oman's top-down mode of governance, its state-centric mode of governance" (p.11-12).

However, Oman's economy is unstable due to its minimal and dwindling oil reserves (Katz, 2004). The state's budget has witnessed several dramatic deficits since 1986 because of the declining oil prices, especially in 2015 when the oil price dropped significantly from 120 US$ to under 50 US$ per barrel (MOF, 2016, MOI, 2014). Thus, the financial deficits have affected the implementation of some five-year plans, and various projects were suspended. In turn, the number of job seekers has increased. Consequently, there is no doubt that the instability of the Omani economy affects the educational planning which is wholly funded by the government. The statistical data show that the education budget, which is increasing annually, deducts the largest proportion of the total governmental spending. In 2009 the MOE received 26.1% from the total governmental spending budget for the civil service sector. The government provides free educational services to all governorates of the Sultanate. The services include providing suitable and modern school buildings with various facilities and teaching aids, plus curriculum development and the recruitment of qualified teachers. These educational services are affected if there is any instability in oil prices (MOE, 2014a).

Therefore, a new strategy, the *Vision for Oman's Economy: Oman 2020*, was launched in 1995 to support the country's economic and social development. Economic diversification through increasing industrialization trading, privatization, and foreign investment are the basic features of this strategy (1996-2020). With the implementation of this strategy, a high percentage of expatriates have been attracted to invest or to become employed in the private sector. Additionally, plans have been set to gradually

indigenize some jobs in the private sector with Omani employees in order to overcome the unemployment problem (Al-Abri, 2016; Allen & Rigsbee, 2000; MONE, 2004).

With regard to unemployment issue, Oman has limited ability to employ more Omanis in contrast with its limited income resources and declining oil prices. The number of Omani job seekers, who graduates from schools or from higher institutions, is increasing every year. According to the World Bank's figures (2014), the unemployment rate of young Omani was over 20% in 2013. Different reports and studies indicate that the Omani graduates lack the appropriate skills and knowledge required in the labour market (Al-Abri, 2016; Al-Tubi, 2014; Issan & Gomaa, 2010; MOE, 2017; MOE & WB, 2013), especially in the private sector, which is considered as a major employing sector in Oman. This sector prefers to employ expatriates (non-Omani) who are more cheaper and skilful than Omani labour. Thus, the government set training programs for Omani people to upgrade their skills in accordance with requirements of the private sector in order to replace expatriates (Al-Abri, 2016; Allen & Rigsbee, 2000; MONE, 2004). However, this was inadequate to decrease the large number of expatriates. Much effort is needed from the government to minimize the unemployment problem. The MOE should maximize the quality of schooling with providing diversity in education in order students will be more skilful and can compete in labour market. This requires to reform its educational system, especially in developing curriculum and focusing on developing critical and independent thinking and problem solving skills. Additionally, opening different areas of specialization according to labour market's demands in different private universities and colleges in the country is another step that would qualify Omani youth to obtain good jobs in the labour market as well as to gradual replace the large number of expatriates.

Overall, considering the fluctuation of oil prices, the declining oil reserves and the rapid growth of Omani's young population, Oman will still encounter a serious economic problem in the next few years if the government fails to find adequate non-oil income resources. Hence, this influences the financial sustainability of public education in the long term, which introduces the importance of expanding private education, which plays a significant role in promoting economic diversification through privatization and foreign investment.

2.2.3 Political features

Oman has witnessed democratic political development since His Majesty Sultan Qaboos became the ruler in 1970. He has gradually tried to establish public political participation by forming the Basic Law (the Omani constitution) and different councils (the State Council and Consultation Council), whose members are either appointed by

Sultan Qaboos or elected by local people. He has equalized regional, tribal and ethnic interests in forming the national administration. In 1996, the Basic Law was published as a regulations framework for the functions of the country and its institutions. The implementation of the Basic Law increases the political participation of citizens, and guarantees their freedom, protection, dignity and rights (Miller, 1997; MOI, 2014). The Omani constitution is considered as the guiding principles of policies for the country. The state's legislation is based on the Islamic Sharia, as mentioned in this document.

Moreover, Oman and its government is headed by one person; His Majesty, the Sultan Qaboos. Under His Majesty come two main councils; the Ministers Council and the Oman Council. Sultan Qaboos supervises the development of the country's plans and chairs both of these councils. The Council of Ministers, which consists of all the ministers or advisors and functions as a cabinet, runs the country by delegation from His Majesty. This council helps His Majesty in "giving recommendations, setting policies, overseeing the performance of the state's organizations and following up the implementation of laws, decisions, statutes, decrees, court rulings and treaty agreements" (Al-Abri, 2016, p.14). The Council of Oman, which includes Heads of tribes, scholars, governors of each governorate, and the elected members of each wilayat, is combined of *Majlis Al Dawla* (State Council) and the *Majlis Al Shura* (Consultation Council). The Omani Council is based on the Islamic principle of *Alshura*, which means "participation in the form of consultation in discussions leading to the making of decisions" (Almoharby, 2010, p.6). Accordingly, the Islamic religion, through *Alshura*, encourages a participative decision-making approach. However, this council has no authority to initiate new legislations to the government or to make any new decisions despite its members being consulted in the decision-making process in some aspects. Their power and authority is to review the country's laws and decisions regarding educational, social and economic development plans, as well as implementing a form of accountability. They may only present proposals and recommendations to amend various laws, and make improvements in different welfare aspects (Almoharby, 2010; Riphenburg, 1998; Alhaj, 2000; Katz, 2004).

Therefore, full democracy is not allowed in public political participation. The decision-making authority of general policies in the country is fully centralized, particularly in security, military and political sectors. Each Ministry drafts laws and sets policies in its fields of specialization, but they are required to gain His Majesty's approval in order to be applied. Additionally, any new legislation is issued by royal decree by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, who is the only person to have the full and ultimate authority and power in issuing political legitimacies. He holds the most important and powerful positions (Katz, 2004 p.3) such as the "*prime minister*", the "*defense minister*", the

"*finance minister*", the "*foreign affairs minister*" and "*the chairman of the central bank*" as well as the sultan position. In this respect, Alhaj (2000) states that, "Oman is an autocracy in which the sultan retains the ultimate authority on all important foreign and domestic issues" (p.98). Thus, it could be argued that the Sultan's rule system in decision-making is more centralized than the governance system in the western countries. This centralized system is practiced in the management of the governmental institutions including the MOE, which expresses the centralised power system in the way it acts and preserves decision making authority. Additionally, this policy might create obstacles to reform the education system towards decentralization which requires approval from higher authorities.

2.3 The Education System in Oman

Omani education is based on a philosophy extracted from Sharia and Islamic law principles and values as well as principles of the heritage and the culture of the country, contemporized in line with technology and sciences in order to enhance economic development and prepare children to meet the living and working challenges. Also, maintaining and reinforcing the Islamic, national and cultural identity is the main objective of the Omani philosophy of education (Education Council, 2017). Therefore, the Omani government places great emphasis on expanding and diversifying education to provide for the community's needs, but simultaneously it is linked with the indigenous traditions and culture, in addition to modern syllabi and approaches. This section discusses briefly the development of the Omani education system, the context of private schools and the management and organization of this system.

2.3.1 Development of the Omani education system

Similar to other Muslim countries, and especially in the Arab Gulf States, the Holy Quran or religious schools (known as *kuttab* in Arabic), which are led by the indigenous community, were the sole providers of education in Oman prior to the late 19th century. They provided basic education, teaching the Holy Quran together with the basic Islamic principles, Arabic reading and writing, and some primary arithmetic for children of both sexes under the age of 10 (Al-Dhahab, 1987; Issan, 2005; MOE, 2013; Noorani, 2003). Between 1940 and 1959, however, this traditional system was shifted to formal schooling. Three public schools were established in three cities. They provided elementary education to 909 male students only, teaching traditional and some modern subjects such as Science, Geography and History (Al-Adawi, 2004; Issan, 2005; Al-Rasbi, 2013).

Since 1970, rapid development in the education system has been achieved remarkably by the MOE. Education was offered as a basic right for all males and females, citizens

or expatriates. The number of schools increased sharply from three schools in 1969 to more than 1,000 schools in 2014, with a total enrolment of 523,188 male and female students. The illiteracy rate dropped by 2.5% in the academic year 2015/2016 (Al-Abri, 2009; Al-Abri, 2016; Majlis A'shura, 2016; MOE, 2014b).

The development of the education system in Oman has undergone two main phases. The first phase was implemented between 1970 and 1997. This phase was known as the *general education* which was as a reform of the previous educational system. It focused mostly on the quantity of education, in which the MOE provided education for all citizens by establishing schools and adult educational centres around the Sultanate in order to tackle and eradicate illiteracy and to remove problems of gender inequality (Al-Belushi, 2003; Al-Najar, 2016; MOE, 2004). During this stage, only the national curriculum was set to be taught to students instead of depending on the other countries' curricula which might contradict the educational philosophy (Al-Adawi, 2004).

In contrast, because the first educational reform's emphasis was more on quantity than quality, some weaknesses were recognized. One of these weaknesses was that the majority of graduates from the general education did not have access to higher educational institutions, such as universities and colleges. Additionally, the outcomes of secondary education did not meet the requirement of the labour market which resulted in the increasing rate of unemployment among young Omanis besides the large number of expatriates in different fields (Al-Adawi, 2004; Al-Hammami, 1999; Al-Ghafri, 2002; Issan & Gomaa, 2010). Hence, as a result of these weaknesses and the spreading of technology globally, the MOE decided to introduce a new educational system reform qualitatively by implementing the second phase, known as *basic and post basic education*. This was introduced in the academic year 1998/1999 and focused on the quality of education in terms of changing the structure of the system and the contents of the curriculum specifically, with guarantees of better outcomes (Al-Najar, 2016; Issan & Gomaa, 2010; MOE, 2004, MOE, 2017).

Basic education is a ten year system which consists of two cycles covering grades 1–4 and 5–10. Changes in the new education system included different aspects of education. The most important of these aspects were the structure of the school and the administration system, educational aims, content of curriculum and textbooks, students assessment, teacher training, supervision and teaching methods. Basic education is followed by two years at secondary level (grades 11 and 12) which is known as post-basic education, which prepares students for accessing higher education institutions or obtaining jobs in the labour market (Al-Najar, 2016; MOE, 2001).

These educational reforms cost the Omani government a huge budget. As previously mentioned in earlier section, the MOE budget increases annually in line with inflation. Salaries and wages account for 90% of the Ministry budget. The Ministry's budget in the school year 2010/11 was 707,464,266 Omani Rial (RO) which represents 26.1% of the general budget of the country, whereas this came to more than one billion Omani Rial in the school year 2015/2016. Additionally, the cost of each student in different educational stages increases from year to another. In 2000 each student cost the government 2,029 Omani Rial for 12 years of school education, while this cost rose to more than 8 thousands Omani Rial in 2012 (MOE, 2014a; MOE, 2016). Thus, compared to the budget allocated to other ministries the government allocates a very high budget for free education and its reforms, and therefore the question of whether the government can afford to provide free education to all remains. The table below shows the growth of government expenditure on public education from 2011 to 2016.

Table 1: The expenditure on public education from 2011 to 2016

Year	Total MOE's Budget (RO million)	% of GDP
2011	790.5	3.0%
2012	925.2	3.1%
2013	967.8	3.2%
2014	1318.7	4.2%
2015	1315.9	5.0%
2016	1326.3	5.2%

Source: NCSI (2017)

However, despite this high expenditure and the reforms on education, the quality of the educational outputs is not as expected. Different reports and educational researchers criticized the reforms in the Omani education system (Al-Tubi, 2014; Issan & Gomaa, 2010; MOE, 2017; MOE & WB, 2013). The system is "still challenged by low educational achievement when measured internationally" (MOE, 2017 p.29). For example, the results of the (TIMMS) and (PIRLS) indicate that Omani student performance is below the international benchmarks (Al-Tubi, 2014). As a result, the MOE and the World Bank report (2013) claims some wastage in resources due to "*inefficient practices*" (p.100).

Therefore, the encouragement of the private sector to invest in the educational field is one solution to reduce wastage of financial resources, especially as the country's income is unstable. Additionally, achieving the aim of preparing students for the labour market, collaboration and partnerships should be strengthened with the labour sectors,

particularly the private sector, in reforming the country's education system. Accordingly, the private sector should be encouraged to share the responsibility of diversifying educational opportunities and addressing the needs of people, whether through private schooling or private higher education.

2.3.2 Omani private schools

Private schools constitute a vital part of the Omani education system. They are considered as both parallel and complementary education to government schooling. They have been welcomed and supported as a collaborative venture by the government which encourages them financially, ideologically and practically. They play a major part in the development of the country, and save hugely on finances for the government. However, the government does not grant them any funds. It provides a reduction in text book costs, with 25% off for all private school students in all subjects, except for international curriculum subjects; English Language, Mathematics and Science in English. It also grants private school owners soft loans to construct their school buildings (Al-Abri, 2009).

2.3.2.1 Economic factors influencing private schooling in Oman

There are many factors that have contributed to the establishment of private schools in Oman. The rapid population growth of young people in Oman and its economic instability are the two main reasons for the government's encouragement, support and development of the role of the private sector to invest in education. This is one of the fundamental objectives of Oman's economy vision 2020. The contribution of private sector in education results in reducing dependency on oil revenue, and to diversify the country's economy, as well as to decrease expenditure in public education, which are faced with financial challenges; hence, it reduces deficit in the MOE's budget (Al-Abri, 2009). This is in line with the claim of Lieberman (1989) who saw that private sector institutions can deliver educational services economically.

In addition, political choice is an essential factor that facilitates Omani private schools to contribute to the education sector. They are an alternative to public schools and usually fill a gap where public schooling is "either lacking or its quality is perceived as lower" (MOE & WB, 2013, p.196). They attract many school aged children, and largely serve educated and high income Omani and non-Omani families from the social, economic and political elite, in urban and rural areas around the Sultanate. Parents choose private school for their children, mainly on how much they can afford to pay for the particular private school. The school tuition fees differ from one school to another depending on the quality of educational services provided and the academic reputation of the school. Normally, wealthy and upper class families pay high tuition fees in order

for their children to receive a better quality of education (Al Balushi, Al Manthri & Al Ismaili, 2009; Al-Shidhani, 2005).

Furthermore, it could be argued that the parents' dissatisfaction with government educational services is another factor underlying the demand for private schooling, particularly where the outputs of public schooling do not meet the skills and knowledge required for higher education and the labor market (Al-Tubi, 2014; Issan & Gomaa, 2010; MOE, 2017; MOE & WB, 2013). Graduates from private schools, especially bilingual and global schools, have more of a chance of being accepted in local and international universities, as well as securing good jobs with a high salary in the public and private sectors, than those from public schools (Al-Shidhani, 2005). Private schools offer different programs that differentiate them from public education, such as pre-school education, bilingual and international programs. The bilingual and international programs demand teaching international curricula and provide specific resources, including qualified teachers with international experience. The provision of such requirements is very expensive. Accordingly, they cost a very high budget if they are provided by the Omani government. These programs will be explained later in the sub-section (2.3.2.3).

Moreover, the social and economic stability (especially between 2003 and 2013) of the country has resulted in a noticeable increase in the average family's income, and an increase in the number of school-aged children. In 2001, the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, as mentioned in the Statistical Year Book (2003), was RO 3,000.000, whereas it increased by almost double to RO 5,900.000 in 2012 (NCSI, 2013). This has led to greater demand for excellent, distinguished and diversified education. Therefore, the field became open for the private sector to provide educational services to address the needs of people. Table (2) shows the participation of the private sector in education and its development.

Table 2: the development of the private sector contributing to education from 2005/2006 to 2012/2013.

Academic year	Total schools (public and private)		Total number of private schools		The proportion (%) of private schools	
	Schools	Students	Schools	Students	Schools	Students in private schools
2005/2006	1204	596257	158	28183	13.1	4.7
2006/2007	1223	595736	170	32134	13.9	5.4
2007/2008	1226	590610	174	37374	14.2	6.3
2008/2009	1247	583728	200	43396	16.0	7.4
2009/2010	1382	587597	342	56204	24.7	9.6
2010/2011	1427	587846	387	65326	27.1	11.1
2011/2012	1446	588327	406	71274	28.1	12.1
2012/2013	1487	594049	444	79382	29.9	13.4

Source: MOE (2014b)

It would appear from the table above that the private schools in the academic year 2012/2013 represent 29.9% of total schooling, and contains 13.4% of the total number of students. The number of private schools rose from 170 in the school year 2006/2007 to 444 schools in the school year 2012/2013, with an annual growth of 17.4%. Additionally, the number of students rose to more than 79000, with an annual growth of 16.3%. Thus, the increase in the private school numbers is keeping pace with the current increase in the number of students consistent with the focus in educational development (MOE, 2014b). Also, it can be concluded that the increasing number of students enrolled in private schools indicates an increased demand from the local community for private education, and therefore requires the higher authority to grant these schools greater flexibility and autonomy in order to provide the required quality of education.

2.3.2.2 The development of private schools

The private schooling sector has witnessed significant development since 1972 when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos signed the Private Schools Law, giving private schools independent status and a different dimension to education in terms of organization, planning and the introduction of modern educational methods. The first private schools were inaugurated only after His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said became the ruler of Oman. According to the educational statistics available in the MOE there were only two

private schools in the Sultanate in the academic year 1972/1973 with a meagre 115 pupils. However, the number of these schools has increased dramatically since 1977, the year that His Majesty issued Royal Decree No. 68/77 regarding regulations concerning private schools (MOE, 2010). Moreover, the growth in the number of Omani students and the introduction of basic education and international programs in private schools are factors that have helped to increase the demand for private education enrolment. Thus, from the academic year 2005/2006 the number of private schools grew steadily. Between the academic years (2006/2007-2009/2010) it doubled. The number of schools and students enrolled then continued to grow, bringing the schools' number of enrolments in the school year (2014/2015) to 486 private schools, exceeding 97,000 pupils.

Table 3 below shows the development of private schools during the last 10 school years (2005/06- 2014/15).

Academic Year	Schools	Students
2005/06	158	28183
2006/07	170	32134
2007/08	174	37374
2008/09	200	43396
2009/10	343	56234
2010/11	387	65326
2011/12	406	71274
2012/13	444	79382
2013/14	468	89275
2014/15	486	97465

Source: DGPS, MOE (2014c)

Table 4 shows the total number of Omani private schools in the Omani socio-geographic in the school year (2014/2015).

Governorates	Number of private schools	Number of students enrolled	Overall Population
Muscat	182	45,804	775,878
Batinah North	68	13,791	483,582
Batinah South	46	7,335	289,008
Dakhilyah	56	7,497	326,651
Sharkiyah South	39	7,508	218,446
Sharkiyah North	34	3,381	132,068
Buraimi	11	2,558	729,17
Dhahirah	15	1,653	151,664
Dhofar	30	7,516	249,729
Wasta	1	40	42,111
Musandam	4	382	31,425
Total	**486**	**97,465**	**2,773,479**

Source: Adapted from (MOE, 2014c; NCSI, 2010)

The table (4) shows that private schools are more frequently found in the Muscat and Batinah North governorates with 250 private schools and 59,595 students in total. Some of the reasons for this include the fact that these areas are more densely populated (1,259,460 people), in addition to the fact that Muscat is the capital of Oman. Both governorates are well established centres of trading and economic development, thus, they include wealthy people and businessmen who either have the ability to invest their money by establishing private schools or enrolling their children in these schools. It could also be argued that both areas contain a higher number of better educated parents who have been educated to a higher level and are more aware of the advantages of private schooling and its subsequent impact on their children in later years. Besides, the royal family, and those from the upper classes, live in Muscat and contribute to the development of private schools. In contrast, remote areas such as the Wasta and Musandam governorates, only have a small number of private schools as they are the least populated areas in Oman.

2.3.2.3 Types of Omani Private Schools

Omani private schools are not all the same in the educational programs and stages that they provide. They all provide pre-school education, which includes either kindergarten (KG) level, or the teaching of the Holy Quran, or both, in all the 11 governorates of Oman. However, few of them provide all of the educational levels, from

KG to grade 12. Such schools are available only in three governorates, which are highly populated, with most of them being located in the Muscat governorate. Therefore, private schools in Oman can be classified into five types, Quranic, kindergarten, monolingual, bilingual and global schools. Quranic and kindergarten are considered as pre-schooling.

Quranic Schools

Quranic schools are those schools in which the Holy Quran and basic alphabetical letters and numbers in Arabic and English are taught for students between the ages of three to five years old only. They have similar objectives to *Kuttab* schools, mentioned in the Section (2.3.1). Students are also taught the importance of religious obligations, such as praying and fasting, in addition to other social traits, such as honesty and loyalty. Each school can teach its own curriculum, but it has to be approved by the MOE (Al-Abri, 2009).

Kindergarten Schools

Kindergartens (KGs) are educational institutions that provide children with a variety of educational activities associated with educational games, which are deemed appropriate for the cognitive, emotional and social development of children (Lawati, 2005). Kindergartens in Oman are the providers of pre-school education at its most formalized. This is a two-year program in which children are generally accepted from the age of three and a half to five and a half. The study period is divided into two levels - KG 1 and KG 2, which frequently act as a feeder to basic education (cycle one), and are school owned and operated privately by the same group or company. Kindergarten schools have the choice to apply for the Ministry's KG curriculum or for one of their own, which must be approved by the Ministry. Children learn English as a subject from KG1 (Al-Balushi, Al-Abri, Al-Raeesi, Al-Mamari & Noor, 2005; Hassan, 2004).

Monolingual Schools

Monolingual schools teach students all subjects in Arabic except for foreign languages from kindergarten to grade 12. They are obliged to teach the same curriculum taught in the government schools from grade 1 to grade 12 in all subjects, except English language which can be from their own syllabus, but which has to be approved by the Ministry. Conversely, they can add syllabuses and educational programs, or teach own syllabuses, except Islamic Education Studies, after the approval of the Ministry. Thus, the curriculum in these type of schools (grades 1-12), except for English language as a subject, is identical to that of public schools. Other foreign languages such as French

and German are allowed to be taught as well as English language (MOE, 2008b; Majlis A'shura, 2016).

Bilingual Schools

Bilingual schools are similar to monolingual schools in their curriculum and teaching their own syllabuses and educational programs, except that the curriculum of math, science and information technology (IT) are all taught in the English language. Bilingual schools have the choice to choose suitable books for their students for these subjects from a list approved centrally for use in Omani private schools, or use their own syllabus after obtaining the MOE's approval. Bilingual schools should apply for an approved scope and sequence plan when teaching math and science subjects or IT (Issan, 2013). Moreover, according to the policy document of private schools (PDPS) (MOE, 2006b), any bilingual school is permitted to apply the international curriculum from grade 9 to grade 12 in Arabic subject as a first language and English subject as a second language. Additionally, they are allowed to teach the international syllabus in other subjects, except Islamic education studies, according to the international exams they offer to their students after gaining the Ministry's approval (MOE, 2008b).

Global Schools

Global schools are those which obtain accreditation from recognized international educational institutions. They implement an international curriculum and programs at all educational levels under the management and supervision of international educational institutions which are recognized by the DGPS, MOE. They are suitable for students who wish to sit international exams, such as IGCSE, A-Level and IB (MOE, 2012).

Omani and expatriate (Arab and non-Arab) students can attend any global school in Oman according to the international educational program and qualification that suits them. However, according to the PDPS (MOE, 2006b), any global school has to teach Omani pupils the Omani national curricula for Islamic education studies from grades 1 to 12, and Arabic language and Social Studies or their equivalents from grades 1 to 8. Additionally, Arabic as a first language in grades 9 to 12 should be from an international curriculum.

To sum up, all types of private schools have to gain approval from the MOE for any new curriculum or educational programs, other than those already approved. They have to teach the national curriculum of Islamic education studies for all enrolled Omani students. Table (5) below shows the number of private schools according to each type in the academic year (2014/2015).

Table 5: The number of different types of Omani private schools in the academic year (2014/2015)

Type of private school	Number
Quranic	83
Kindergartens	128
Monolingual	108
Bilingual	151
Global	16
Total	486

Source: Adapted from (DGPS, MOE, 2014c)

2.3.2.4 Private schools finance

The different types of schools are independently funded and their financial affairs are the schools' business, in that the Ministry does not inspect or intervene in this matter. Nevertheless, they are required to obtain the Ministry's approval in relation to tuition fees and any change regarding them, hence, they have full autonomy in controlling and managing their budget. The tuition fees of each of these schools differ from one school to another depending upon the facilities provided as well as the quality of educational services and programs offered (Al-Shidhani, 2005). Thus, high tuition fees buy high quality educational services. In the higher quality private schools, the fees are higher than those of lower quality. The global schools, for example, usually charge high fees because they provide international programs and qualifications approved by international educational institutions. Moreover, private schools' fees differ from one governorate/region to another. Muscat and Batinah North governorates are the most populated places in Oman, with wealthier citizens, and consequently, private schools in these areas normally charge higher fees.

2.3.2.5 Private schools support

Although it is difficult to provide government funding to Omani private schools as the country encounters financial deficit in its budget, they need to be supported in order to provide efficient and quality education, and hence they would be able to compete with other schools. Similar to Omani private higher education institutions, Omani private schools would possibly be funded in the following ways (Al-Bulushi, 2012; Al-Rehali, 2015; MOE,2003; Salwaa, 2013):

- Granting schools the government text books free of charge.
- Reducing the cost of purchasing teaching aids, tapes and computer programs.
- Granting schools land to build their school buildings.
- Paying part of private school staff's salaries by the government.

- Exempting schools from several government fees such as the annual building rent, the extraction of building permits, and connecting multiple services such as water, electricity, telephone and internet.
- Paying the bills of electricity, water, telephone and internet services by schools at normal prices and not at commercial prices.
- Paying student's fees or part of them by the government.

2.4 The management of the education system

In the early 1970s, the administration of the education system in Oman was controlled by the central authority in order to ensure the implementation of common national standards. It has been characterized as a centralized and hierarchical system. However, a decentralized education system has begun to be implemented in the mid-1990s (MOE & WB, 2013). This section provides a brief overview of the Omani education system's management.

2.4.1 Educational legislation and decision-making

His Majesty Sultan Qaboos's directives and governmental decisions, based on the recommendation of the consultative committees of the Shura council and State council, are the sources of educational policies. These policies are translated into plans within the national development plan of the country. The plans are implemented every five years and called five-year development plans, initiated in 1976. The five-year plans of the education sector, including the MOE, address educational objectives, strategies and projects. The implementation process of each plan contains specific timeframes (MOE, 2008a; UNESCO, 2011).

The MOE's strategies, objectives and planning projects are formulated and established through Ministerial and administrative decisions. According to the MOE's structure, as shown in Appendix (1), the educational decisions are made hierarchically through committees and boards headed by the MOE's minister, or one of its undersecretaries, and the general directors who are members. The structure of the MOE consists of three authorities; central, local and school levels. The top centralized level is the Ministry Central Headquarters, located in Muscat, which has the central directorates, besides the minister and undersecretaries' offices, where ministerial and administrative decisions at local and school level are made. Under the central level comes the 11 General Educational Directorates, located in the governorates, which represent local level authority. These directorates are responsible for controlling the education system's implementation, according to the "Ministry's organisation, structure and administrative system" (Al-Adawi, 2004, p.25). The third level is the schools which are functioning as executive management units and are supervised at local level. They

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implement all central regulations and local requirements; hence, it could be argued that they have no decision-making authority in developing or improving the educational policies. The central level supervises and monitors functions at both local level and school sites in order to ensure the Ministry's policies and plans are implemented properly (Al-Adawi, 2004; MOE, 2008a; UNESCO, 2011). Consequently, it seems that decision-making in the educational system is centralized, especially decisions relating to the distribution of financial resources, national curriculum, assessment system, and the administration of school staffing levels and teacher recruitment procedures (MOE, 2006a). In contrast, this centralized system does not seem successful in developing educational outputs and encouraging local participation (Al-Kitani, 2002), thus, there are now new moves toward decentralization.

2.4.2 Decentralization in the education system

Decentralization in educational administration and decision-making is supported and encouraged by the MOE at local level in order to enhance performance and ensure rapid and instant response instead of waiting for central directives (MOE & WB, 2013; UNESCO, 2011). Al-Rabiey (2002) points out two strategies adopted by the MOE in the administration and management of the education system. The first is "to restructure and revitalize the administrative system by decentralization and delegation of authority to make decisions at subordinate levels". The second one is "to introduce a system of making informed corporate decisions, and effective implementation, follow up and constructive feedback" (p.32). In this respect, the central level made some reforms. In the beginning, the implementation of decentralization has gradually started by delegating some responsibilities from the headquarters (central level) to the middle and regional offices (local level). This demanded the Ministry reorganize its organizational structure by creating several middle level directorates and departments as well as local policy committees with clearly defined roles, tasks and responsibility. This facilitates cooperation and promotes better communication and understanding between all of the Ministry's levels, thus enhancing its efficiency of decision-making processes.

In addition, in each region local councils, such as the Council of Parents, are established and involved in some of the educational responsibilities. Regional general directors are granted the power to make decisions regarding resource allocations. Also, budgetary implementation, public examination functions, hiring and transferring teachers, some in-service teacher training, and designing and constructing school buildings are devolved to local level. In contrast to these decentralized functions, some current functions, such as the grade 12 national public examinations and textbooks and curriculum content remain under the central level administration (MOE & WB, 2013).

Moreover at school level, in 1993 a number of reform programs were introduced in the structure and the role of school administration. Decentralization in the form of school-based management was introduced for the purpose of enhancing schools and encouraging local level decision-making. The responsibility of the school management is devolved to the school board, including school principal, vice principal, teachers, administrators. Support councils, such as Students' Council and the Parent Teacher Council, have also been formed to help the school board in managing the school and in attaining educational objectives. Initially, limited functions, such as benefiting from cafeteria revenue, have been devolved to pilot public school administration. Later, further autonomy in decision-making on administrative, financial, and technical matters was devolved to selected public schools' authority through Ministerial Decision No. 2/2006. For example, functions, including student affairs, supervision affairs, and public projects, maintenance and services affairs, have been devolved to these schools. This ministerial decision empowers the school administration to have a greater role in planning, implementation and the follow-up of different activities and programs for the purpose of enhancing performance (MOE & WB, 2013; MOE, 2006a; UNESCO, 2011).

Furthermore, new management development programmes, such as school administration and school performance evaluation diplomas, have been allocated by the Ministry. School administrators are taught and trained on how to make and implement corporate decisions effectively in schools. Hence, such projects develop the administration of schools and grant school leaders more autonomy and confidence in making the school's decisions (MOE & WB, 2013; Rassekh, 2004).

However, Al-Ghefeili (2014) found that despite the MOE's initiative in devolving decision-making authority to schools, it still interferes in their decisions over several school related operations. He indicated that the Ministry has the final say concerning any decision-making process. This means that the decision-making authority has not been devolved yet.

On the other hand, private schools are not included in these reform projects because they are administrated separately to public schools. Private schools are under the supervision of one central directorate, the General Directorate of Private Schools (GDPS). The MOE does not include private schools in its planning because they are funded privately. The management of private schools and the authority of decision-making will be discussed in the next sub-section.

2.4.3 The management of private schools

The MOE, represented by the DGPS located at central level, supervises the work of private schools both at a technical and administrative level. This directorate also has

the authority to formulate private schools' policies, regulations, aims and objectives. The Ministry issued a regulations code (bylaws), known as the PDPS, which offers guidance to the owners and administrators of private schools on how best to implement the various aspects of different programs in these schools, following specific guidelines. The code contains regulations in areas of public order and supervision, conditions for the establishment of private schools, school systems, curricula and teaching plans, students' affairs, administration, teaching staff and related jobs, and general rules (MOE, 2006b). Additionally, educational supervisors and administrators from the DGPS carry out supervisory and monitoring tasks at private schools in order to ensure that these schools implement the Ministry's policies and regulations.

Since 2000, there has been a gradual change in emphasis in the educational system in private schools towards more decentralization. They have been granted a greater degree of flexibility in relation to management. For example, they can now both choose and dismiss teachers, apply their own curriculum in certain subjects and use their own criteria and examinations to evaluate their students. The MOE now allows these schools to implement new educational programs such as A'levels and IB programs. Moreover, these schools are allowed to have their own school year calendar providing that they abide by the Ministry regulations. This has resulted in ensuring that some private schools are more powerful and much more competent than many other educational institutions (MOE, 2003).

However, despite the flexibility in the management granted to private schools, it seems that the authority of decision-making is still centralized. The real power of decision-making has not yet been devolved. Private schools are not allowed to implement any decision made by school management without obtaining advanced approval from the MOE. This argument will be discussed according to the current Ministry's policy regulated in the PDPS citing four examples of decision-making domains - school building, curriculum and teaching plan, assessment, and recruitment of school staff and student admission.

School Building

The owners of private schools are not allowed to run their schools in any building without having first received permission from the MOE. The working guide of the PDPS, (MOE, 2006b) stipulates that the school building should fulfil all educational and health conditions as specified and imposed by the central level at the Ministry. Schools have to be well-furnished and supplied with suitable equipment and resources. Also, the school building cannot be used to engage in any activity during the school holidays without having first received approval from the Ministry. Thus, it could be argued that

the use of school buildings is highly centralized. Providing a school building according to the ministry's terms is costly, especially for those investors who want to open private schools outside of the capital area, because the fees in these areas are less than those imposed in the capital.

Curriculum and Teaching Plan

The MOE in Oman sets a national curriculum for government schools and produces textbooks for them (Issan, 2013; MOE & WB, 2013, Majlis A'shura, 2016). Although private schools have to teach this curriculum and purchase the same text books, the Ministry does allow them to apply their own curriculum in certain subject areas, subject to first gaining advanced official permission from the Ministry. The PDPS (MOE, 2006b, p.10) stipulates that private schools may add their own curricula, textbooks and activities after having first obtained approval from the Ministry. Therefore, private schools are free to choose the curricula and textbooks they consider to be advantageous to their needs according to the Ministry's objectives. These curricula are studied by specialists in the Ministry prior to their being approved. International curricula for English, Mathematics, Science subjects (Biology, Physics and Chemistry) and IT can be chosen by schools. The curricula for Islamic studies, Arabic and Social Studies, for Omani students, must be exactly the same as those used in the government schools, as the government is responsible for ensuring that the curriculum falls in line with Islamic principles, taking into consideration the heritage of the country, the Gulf and the wider Arab world. Consequently, it seems that private schools do have some limited flexibility in choosing and updating their own curriculum, however they are not permitted to apply this without approval from the MOE.

Private schools have the choice to use the Ministry's centralized weekly teaching plan or their own plan which can be created or adopted to their particular school's needs. Principals have the authority to maximize the number of periods for each subject as they see fit. Teachers have the autonomy to select international teaching materials to suit the needs of their students and to utilize a wide range of teaching methods that concentrate on developing the learners themselves. Nonetheless, approval from the MOE is a must in order to implement the decentralized weekly teaching plan (MOE, 2006b).

Assessment

Assessment in the majority of private schools is more centralized at grades (10-11) and less centralized in grades (1-9). The MOE sets certain assessment criteria that schools, except global schools which implement an international assessment system,

have to follow in the basic and post basic education stages. Also, there are regional mid- and final term examinations from grade 5 up to grade 12. These schools sit for a national exam set centrally, known as the General Education Diploma examination in Grade 12. Furthermore, the PDPS (MOE, 2006b, p.10) stipulates that private schools can follow their own assessment system and examinations after they have first been approved by the Ministry. This allows teachers to develop assessment criteria according to their pupils' levels with more flexibility and efficiency. However, this means that the Ministry has to follow up the examinations conducted by these schools and to scrutinize students' results very carefully in order to ensure that there is no manipulation regarding results at school level.

School Staff and Pupils' Recruitment

Although private schools' management have full autonomy in choosing their teaching and administration staff, they still have to be approved by the MOE, including part time teachers, in order to ensure that they are appropriately qualified. Principals and teachers of private schools have to be employed according to the Ministry's conditions, which restricts private schools' freedom of choosing staff according to their preferences on one hand, and on another hand this guarantees to the MOE, as well as the parents of the students, that these schools employ qualified teachers. For instance, teachers should have at least a university degree in one of the school subjects that will be taught, with a minimum of two years of relevant teaching experience (MOE, 2006b). On the other hand, the owners have the power to dismiss staff without obtaining prior approval from the MOE.

Student admission in private schools is open and depends on parents' choice, as well as the information that the schools provide about themselves. This creates strong competition amongst private schools. Hence, the administration of each school has to market its programs, facilities, academic achievements and resources. Some schools, in particular the bilingual and global schools apply admission tests. They accept any student who is capable of paying the fees stipulated. However, schools must abide by the Ministry's regulations regarding admission age. They have to obtain the Ministry's approval in relation to tuition fees and any change regarding them. Consequently, access to private schools is equitable only for those who have the ability to pay the tuition fees.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has presented the scene for the study, outlining the geographical, demographic, economic and political features of Oman. It has also provided a brief

overview of the development of the Omani educational system and its management organization, with more emphasis on the context of private schools.

Overall, it can be noticed clearly from this chapter that there is a very rapid development in all facets of life in Oman, including education, which in turn form a challenge for education in several areas. The MOE has to provide more educational facilities because of the high percentage of schooling age, as well as providing diversity in education commensurate with the geographical, economic, social and cultural features of each region. This requires the government to expend a high budget in financing public education, putting it under pressure with a decline in oil revenues and the fluctuation of oil prices. Additionally, the outcomes of the Omani public education system are still low, although it has witnessed different reforms. School graduates' capabilities do not meet the skills and knowledge required for higher education and the labor market. More qualified human resources are required due to the development in economy and diversification in technology. This demands the MOE to make changes in the school curriculum which should concentrate more on Science and Technology, although there may be some resistance to this from the more conservative people as they may fear that these changes might negatively affect the country's identity. Also, the three Islamic sects that exist in the country could hinder school curriculum decentralization to avoid any contradictions. These assumptions will be examined in this study.

Expanding the contribution of private schooling in education may overcome these challenges, especially financial deficits, and offer more choices for parents to provide diversity in education for their children, and thus, allowing them to participate in education expenses with the government. However, there exists a requirement from the MOE to provide more flexibility and to devolve greater responsibility to private schools.

Moreover, it seems that a centralization system is applied in education management and decision making, as well as in supervising and monitoring Omani private schools, with little, gradual movement towards decentralization by devolving some responsibility to school authority. However, the final decision still remains with the higher authorities, which may constrain schools from making educational changes to the response of community needs, hence, the decision-making power has not devolved as yet. This may be because of a lack of trust or guidance and initiatives to encourage private schools to take accountability for making their own decisions, which may result in effective improvements. It might also be because of the current traditional models of governance. Thus, it is important to examine the perceptions of school stakeholders

regarding decision-making authority and to what extent it should be centralized or decentralized over school domains.

Chapter Three: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

Educational systems vary from country to country, with some countries implementing centralized systems, and others using a balance between centralized and decentralized systems. Also, the authority over the decision-making process differs between these systems. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of related literature of school management reforms with the inclusion of international studies in relation to Oman and more in-depth analysis of the reasons for similarities and difference; and their significance to the study. It is divided into five sections. The first and second sections review the theoretical concepts and characteristics of centralization and decentralization of education, with a focus on the devolution of decision-making authority. The third section presents the literature on the relationship between school based management (SBM) and devolving decision-making in schools, with particular reference to the models and types of SBM. Empirical evidence about decision-making decentralization will be outlined in the fourth section. The final section reviews relevant literature on school management change, and discusses resistance to change, causes and ways of overcoming such resistance.

3.2 Centralization of education

For general understanding, centralization can be defined as a management concept that relates to the centre of government which has the authority, power and control to make decisions. Administrative decisions are concentrated at the higher level of the organization (Hanson, 1972), which means lower levels have to implement these decisions and have to gain permission for any forward step. Schools, for instance, cannot buy any resources or change their school calendar without permission being granted by the MOE. In centralized systems all aspects of education are controlled by the MOE including monitoring, financing and managing the education, setting staff salary, curriculum and exams, and regulating the requirements for students' graduation (Florestal & Cooper, 1997; Winkler, 1989). Anderson (2005) highlights three aspects of centralization at a high level. These are goal-setting, establishing priorities and frameworks for accountability.

Centralization is useful for the central office and provides them control over what happens at each school, such as where money is spent and subsequent outcomes (Brown, 1991). For example, they have the authority over the designing of the schools' curriculum, the appointment of principals and teaching staff, the monitoring of the school budget, the distribution of resources, and the setting of exams. In Nigeria, at primary level (Gaynor, 1995), responsibility for policy-making and curriculum

development is made at Federal level. Lauglo and McLean (1985) report that in France, education is highly centralized in relation to the provision of textbooks, teacher training, grading, staffing, salary and timetables. Similarly, in the Omani context the MOE's headquarters follows the centralized system for various aspects, such as school financial issues, curriculum designing, exam setting and staffing recruitment.

However, the centralized authority could hinder operational efficiency especially if organizations are large and mature, such as Ministries of Education, and if lower-level employees and managers are well-trained and have specific knowledge which qualifies them to enhance operational performance of the organization. Educational centralization is criticized by many researchers. One of its disadvantages is that school staff are not afforded any flexibility to make changes that meet their school's needs, nor are they encouraged to nurture creativity (Brown, 1991). Schools have to apply the same planning process they have received from central level, even if it is time consuming or irrelevant. Also, teachers cannot make any changes to their teaching methods. Third, head teachers do not have any autonomy in managing their schools, which in turn has resulted in some Principals resigning in their first year (Bullock & Thomas, 1997). Hammad and Norris (2009) found that Egyptian head teachers lack autonomy in making various decisions, such as who to employ and what equipment to purchase. They have to follow central regulations and gain approval from the local and central authorities when they want to make any changes. Fourth, innovation is considerably hampered in a centralized system. According to Brown (1991), Principals are used to coping with decisions regarding money and finances. They have to implement the decisions made at central level without adapting them to local needs and requirements. Moreover, Rondinelli, Middleton and Verspoor (1990) point out an important issue, which occurs in most developing countries, where a centralized education system is implemented, related to financial limitations. The budgets of the Ministries of Education in such countries, including Oman, are controlled by the Ministry of Finance. They have to gain approval from different bureaucratic and political levels in the government for expenditure of any change. Thus, this external budget control limits their ability to make any changes or innovations.

In addition, Lauglo and Mclean (1985) cite some negative points to centralization. First, they believe that some rural areas, such as some remote areas in Oman, are often neglected by those at central level because their special requirements may not be understood. Therefore, poor people continue to pay more for what amounts to the inadequate education of their children. Second, they also mention that more attention is given to those who are in powerful positions or close to the Minister of Education, such as politicians and wealthy business men. In such cases, the royal family, ministers,

tribal leaders, and others from the upper-middle social class in Oman may obtain special privileges and have more of an advantage of greater resources as Riphenburg (1998) points out, because of their wealth and good relations with those in power. Third, when new directives are issued at central level, such as new assessments or new methods of teaching and learning as part of curriculum reform, those working at a lower level do not receive sufficient information, particularly those who live in rural areas. Consequently, it is difficult for them to understand and implement changes properly. Fourth, planners at the Ministry cannot specifically identify the needs of society with regard to education because they do not share opinions. Finally, the national curriculum may not be relevant to the cultural, linguistic and economic needs of those who live in rural areas. In this respect, different reports (Gonzalez, Karoly, Constant, Salem & Goldman, 2008; MOE, 2017; WB, 2012) identify the weakness of the centralized Omani curriculum which has resulted in unqualified students for higher education and the labor market which requires qualified human resources with specific skills and knowledge according to the development in economy and diversification in technology.

3.3 Decentralization of education

There has been increasing awareness which has developed over a period of time that there should be essential changes in education policies and strategies among the national governments of developing countries (Gaynor, 1995). Most researchers agree that external pressures such as globalization, economic development and growth of technologies are the main factors driving educational decentralization. McGinn and Welsh (1999) comment that there are three major motives underpinning the development and growth of decentralization. First, economic and financial globalization has increased the number of private organizations and strengthened their role in the market (such as in Russia and Eastern Europe), which has caused the central government to shift its decision-making to local groups. Second, the high enrolment of teachers and students in public schools has caused difficulties for the central levels to maintain quality. This has resulted in increasing community dissatisfaction, and hence, shifting the decision-making authority to local levels. Third, the emergence of modern technologies in information and communication areas has increased the ability of local levels to achieve a high level of control over such systems, more than at central level. Accordingly, decision-making was devolved to local level. Additionally, an incapability of being able to organize or finance basic education is considered as an internal force to decentralize education (De Grauwe et al., 2005). However, it can be argued that moving towards decentralization might be the result of the inefficiency of a centralized system which causes difficulties in some aspects.

Decentralization has various meanings that differ from one field to another. In general, researchers associate it with key phrases such as *authority transferring* or *shifting* and *power sharing*. It is defined as the transferring of responsibilities and decision-making authority from a higher level to a lower level in any organization (Mok, 2013; Zajda, 2006). For example, the decision making process for educational administration, policy, planning and resource allocation is transferred from central authorities to school management. Similarly, Bloomer (1991) describes decentralization as moving a control system away from the central area to a local area. Other researchers have a different perception of what decentralization entails. It is power sharing or the distribution of ideas between the staff of an organization (Brown, 1990). Thus, there is no doubt that decentralization indicates insufficient power at local level and the potential benefit of participation in decision-making. For instance, decentralized schools can develop the curriculum, recruit teachers, and provide resources without for the need to gain permission from the centre. In addition, such schools would have the power and responsibility for decision-making on significant school issues.

3.3.1 Types of education decentralization

There are three types of decentralization, which all involve transferring the tasks and functions of the central government authority to lower levels (McGinn & Welsh, 1999; Mok, 2013; Rondinelli et al., 1990; Weidman & DePietro-Jurand, 2011; Zajda, 2006). The first model is called **deconcentration** which involves the shift of administrating tasks and work to other lower units within the central organization, minus the power. For example, some responsibilities can be shifted from the MOE in the capital city to the regional directorates of Omani governorates. Decision-making authority can also be redistributed among different levels of the central organization. However, full responsibility remains with the central level, and thus the regional directorates refer to the Ministry for every decision. Florestal and Cooper (1997) state that "Decision-making authority is transferred within the same legal entity" (p.7). Such an educational system is also applied in Tanzania and Armenia where school funds are shifted from the central government to regional offices. According to Litvack and Seddon (1999) and Edquist (2005) this model is considered to be the weakest form of decentralization as no authority or responsibility is shifted outside the control of the central organization.

Second, **delegation** refers to the transfer of decision-making authority and responsibility for educational administration from central to local levels, but with accountability from the centre. For example, public education functions in many developing countries are delegated to semi-autonomous non-government organizations through subsidies and assistance such as financial assistance, and student fees subsidies are provided to private schools in Chile and Paraguay. The

responsibility of local administrators is to execute decisions that have previously been made at central level. In this case the decision-making power is still held at central level. However, when the central level has difficulty controlling tasks, local autonomy is extended. This form of decentralization is more common in the higher levels of education than in primary education around the world (Florestal & Cooper, 1997; Winkler, 1989).

The third form of decentralization is **devolution** which involves the transfer of full authority and power to independent and autonomous units such as provinces, districts and municipalities, without the direct control of central government. For example, responsibility for providing education in Chile was transferred from the central to municipal governments (Winkler & Gershberg, 2003). This could also be transferred to institutional levels, such as schools. This form is widely applied in the USA, New Zealand, Australia, and Thailand (Abu-Duhou, 1999; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004). Devolving authority over education to local levels is characterized by three features. First, the local bodies that exercise authority are legally separated from the central Ministry. Second, they can act autonomously without the hierarchical supervision of the MOE and within the geographic area set out by law. Third, they are allowed to exercise the authority granted to them by law. Therefore, they are restricted by law to only specific responsibilities, and do not report centrally. The role of the MOE is only to supervise or control indirectly that the local units perform the requirements that are established by law (Florestal & Cooper, 1997). The independent units are often managed by a board of officials elected by local parents. At school level, the decision-making authority of finance and management relates to the principals or the school board. This kind of decentralization is considered to be the strongest form since it has full autonomy in making decisions. It is the main theme of the study and will be discussed further in this next section.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that the definitions of the three terms of decentralization overlap to some extent, so there is no clear definition in the literature, which is less important than the need for a comprehensive strategy (World Bank, 2001). Additionally, Hannaway and Carnoy (1993) argue that each form of decentralization includes certain specific centralization elements, hence, there is no perfect model of decentralization.

Moreover, these three types of decentralization were further defined into two major categories, specifically, "*functional decentralization"* and "*territorial decentralization"* (Mok, 2013, p.6). Dyer and Rose (2005) identify these two types:

> Functional decentralization refers to a shift in the distribution of power between various authorities that operate in parallel, for example, a Ministry of Education may be split into several bodies responsible for different aspects of education. Territorial decentralization relates to the transfer of power from higher to lower geographical tiers of government - national, regional, district and school levels. *(*p.106)

This definition implies that the decision-making authority can be shifted to various departments within the MOE. Each department has different specific responsibilities to the other. Also, decision-making authority can be transferred to educational institutions located in different parts of a country.

In addition, there is another type of decentralization, known as *privatization*. It refers to the transfer of responsibilities and resources from public to private sector institutions (Rondinelli et al., 1990; Dyer & Rose, 2005; Zajda, 2006; Yazdi, 2013). Thus, it is classified as a subset of devolution in which the administration must be legally separated from the central office, and act autonomously without having to gain permission from the centre (Yazdi, 2013). Karlsen (2000) points out that decentralization is portrayed as a system that can be used for a more privatized and commercialized purpose. His concept of decentralization could be interpreted into two ways. The implementation of decentralization may aim to transfer some central burdens to school's responsibility, or granting schools the decision-making power. Those interpretations might be relevant to the Omani context. The figure below shows these different forms of education decentralization.

Figure 1: Forms of education decentralization

Forms of Education Decentralization

Deconcentration   Delegation   Devolution

Privatization

Functional   Territorial
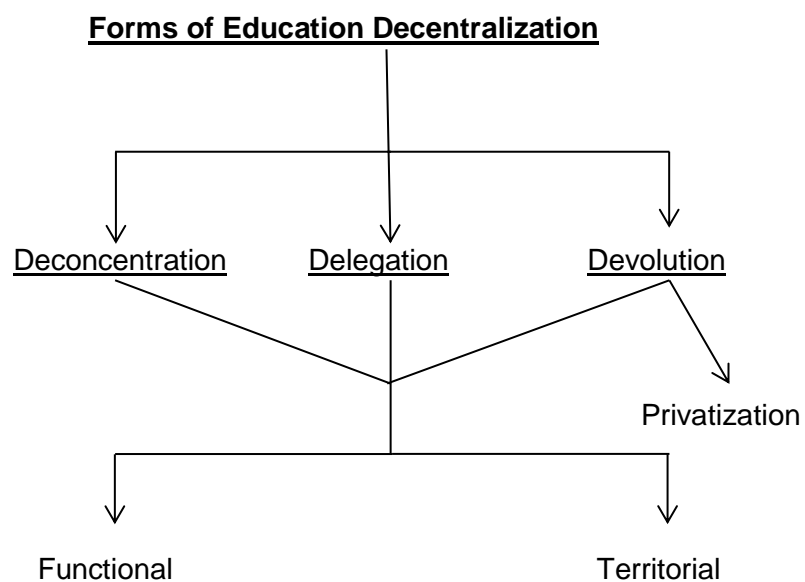
Source: the author of this research

However, in any form mentioned above, there are two particular areas that are very important to follow in order to be successful. First, there should be an accountability system to central level. Second, training those who are carrying out new tasks is a prerequisite of success (Ashmawy, 2013).

In the Omani context, *deconcentration*, *functional* and *territorial* decentralization and *privatization* are found in the MOE. The Ministry Central Headquarters is divided into directorates, departments and sections in which power and tasks are spread between them. In addition, there are educational directorates located in each governorate, which follow all Ministry directives. Public and private schools are situated in each governorate. However, some responsibilities for decision-making, such as curriculum design and national examination, remain centralized at the MOE headquarters. Additionally, decision-making authority of key aspects in private schools is still centralized. Therefore, in the Omani education system devolution has not yet been applied. Constraints to devolution may be related to the political context and administrative structure of the country (Winkler, 1989). The Sultan Qaboos has full and complete power in decision-making, as centralization is the country's mode of the governance, and thus, this authority is practiced at governmental institutions, including the MOE.

It can be summarized that decentralization is not solely confined to the shifting of power or authorities from a higher to a lower level, but would seem to share the same responsibilities among them, otherwise, there would be no role for the higher level. This means that there is no complete decentralized educational system, although decentralization grants schools greater flexibility (Gamage & Zajda, 2009; McGinn & Welsh, 1999). In order to achieve education quality they remain accountable to the central authority for their actions and the implementation of centralized educational standards. Hence, for pragmatic reasons it is difficult for the government to manage the whole process of decision-making. Some responsibilities could be devolved to private schools while other functions may be better remaining with the central authority. Also, the MOE might involve schools in making some, but not all, decisions. These issues need to be investigated through this study.

In addition, the devolution reform grants schools greater autonomy and responsibility in decision-making, more so than other forms of decentralization. Thus, since the theme of this thesis is decision-making authority in private schools, which is categorized as privatization, a subset of devolution, the focus of the next section will be focus on the devolvement of decision-making authority.

3.3.2 Devolution of decision-making power

Devolution, as a form of decentralization, aims to fully transfer decision-making authority, resources and responsibilities from central level to school (local) level. Because of its benefits, such as improving efficiency and reducing its costs, several international agencies, including the World Bank, the US Agency for International Development and the UK Department for International Development, call for devolving decision-making authority to school site (Carr-Hill et al., 2016). Processes of different educational decisions such as finance, management, curricula and staffing can all be made at school level.

3.3.2.1 The concept of decision-making

Decision-making is considered to be one of the major aspects of any management system. In any process of managing a school, a decision is required to be made whether this be in school planning, curriculum management, and/or the evaluation and recruitment of students and staff (Newcombe & McCormick, 2001).

The definition of decision-making varies from one author to another. Problem solving, judgment, views, actors and the process of decision-making are the most used terms that focus on the decision-making definition. Some writers define decision-making as a process of problem solving (Eisenfuhr, 2011; Okumbe, 1998). It is the process of determining the nature of a specific problem that can be resolved by choosing an appropriate solution from a number of alternatives. Similarly, Knezevich (1969) defines decision and decision-making as follows:

> A decision can be defined as a conscious choice action from among a well-defined set of often competing alternatives. Decision–making is a sequential process culminating in a single decision or series of decisions (choices) which stimulate moves or actions. The sequences of activities called decision–making result in the selection of a course of action from an alternative course intended to bring about the future state affairs envisage. (p.32)

Likewise, Mekuria, (2009) describes the process of decision-making as a thinking process or a mental activity in which a person uses his mind to judge between several alternatives in order to select the correct one. Gamage and Pang (2003) define decision-making as "the process through which individuals, groups, and organizations choose courses of action to be acted upon including not only the decisions, but also the implementation of that decision to take a particular course of action" (p.139).

Thus, the above definitions indicate that there are choices from which the best one is selected after evaluation. They also indicate that there are serial processes of action in

order to make a decision with the involvement of more than one person. Besides, decision-making does not only involve one activity, but involves continuous activities.

3.3.2.2 Rationales for devolving decision-making

The main and the most often cited rationale for devolution is that those who are very close to the actions of implementing reforms, and those who are involved in the teaching and learning operation at school sites, such as principals and teachers, are better placed to make decisions because they experience and know well the real function that they are dealing with, and they are more familiar with their own requirements and difficulties. Hence, they are more able to make appropriate decisions to improve the performance of schools (Caldwell & Spinks, 2005; Galiani, Gertler & Schargrodsky, 2008; Hammad & Norris, 2009; Ho, 2006; Vegas, 2007; Williams, Harold, Robertson & Southworth, 1997). Similarly, Winkler (1993) posits that local workers can solve the schools' problems better than those at central level. Thus, it could be argued that decentralized decision-making may improve the quality of education. Likewise, Schiefelbein (2004) assumes that the more authority of decision-making is devolved locally, the greater the voice of the community would be. The benefit of having decisions made by those locally may be relevant in this research context. The issue of whether this positively contributes to education quality or not needs to be explored.

In addition, a school as a site of the marketplace or the expression of market forces is another rationale for devolving the decision-making authority to schools, which has taken place in local management schools in England and Wales (Bush & Gamage, 2001; Turner, 2004). Parents as customers have a choice to select which school they feel is appropriate for their child, and have a diversity of education suppliers. Thus, this might increase competition between schools and empower school management to provide efficient and quality education for local needs. On the other hand, such schools need to be supported because it can prove expensive to compete; hence, the sustainability of funding is very important for private schools (Rutherford & Jackson, 2006), especially for those which "provide more effective learning environments" (OECD, 2012, p.12). Additionally, parents may enrol their child in a low fee private school without being concerned about the quality of the educational services provided, which may negatively influence the students' outcomes. In contrast, caution should be taken for children's admission in high fee private schools, which may cause inequality to access education for children from poor or low income families. Thus, it can be assumed that if private schooling will be publicly funded, parents can choose from a larger number of private schools, which in turn may increase their competition (OECD, 2012). Ways of funding Omani private schools are proposed in sub-section (2.3.2.5) in

Chapter Two. However, providing public funding to Omani private schools could prove difficult as the country faces financial deficit in its budget.

Furthermore, Winkler (1989) subdivides the reasons for decentralization into three divisions; educational finance, efficiency and effectiveness, and redistribution of power. These divisions are related. For instance, educational efficiency and effectiveness can be increased by the redistribution of power which also aims to change educational finance. These three general categories can be considered as the rationale for devolution in the education system. Argumentations for decentralization of these three categories can be illustrated in the following paragraphs.

Decentralization for educational finance has become a worldwide phenomenon and more obvious since the last three decades, particularly in developing countries, in which expenditure on education, especially in elementary education, has increased rapidly. As a result of this high expenditure, central authorities encounter difficulties with financing the educational system (Winkler, 1989). Thus, transferring the finance of education from central to local level, such as private schools in this study context, releases some of the burden on the national budget; and therefore, may increase the quality and quantity of education.

The high unit costs of education in centralized systems can be regarded as a reason for promoting decentralized educational efficiency. The cost of education would be lower if the responsibility of education shifts from the central level to regional level or school sites. In addition, obtaining permission for any minor matters from the central officials is very time-consuming and expensive. Accordingly, shifting decision making powers to local level could speed up the processes of making decisions, saving time and money. Jimenez and Sawada (1999) and King and Ozler (2000) found that the implementation of decentralization in El Salvador and Nicaragua has resulted in low user costs and improved services.

Educational effectiveness arguments are often based on parent and local community participation. The school stakeholders, especially parents, can be involved with the school's decision making process and contribute positively to their children's education. Galiani and Schargrodsky (2001) indicated that children's test results were improved when Argentinian decentralized secondary schools involved parents in school decisions. Furthermore, schools can obtain funds and different resources from the community and the private sector. This will save money and raise the required revenues (De Grauwe et al., 2005). School communities in Chad contributed to 47 per cent of the school staff's salaries (Cohen, 2004).

The argument of the redistribution of power is based on the inclusion of marginal groups in the community. Decentralizing the power of decision making to a lower level would empower such groups to reform the education system, according to their requirements and public needs. This encourages teamwork in schools, and thus, it enhances democracy in making decisions (Bernbaum, 2011; Weidman & DePietro-Jurand, 2011). In contrast, empowering such groups may threaten the government's political power structure, such as in Oman, which has implemented a centralized governing system.

Numerous educators consider decision-making decentralization as a response to local education issues, such as managing schools, developing curriculum and training teachers. Such a response could prevent or reduce contradictions if school administrations were more responsive to problems and accountable to local their community (Nasser-Ghodsi & Owen, 2006). Consequently, better management conflict is another argument for decentralizing decision-making (Weiler, 1990). Disagreements between teaching and non-teaching staff normally occurs in schools. For example, some teachers may stop working if their salaries are not be increased. It would be better for that particular school administration to deal with such problems, rather than them being dealt with at central level. Additionally, Florestal and Cooper (1997) add that a better recognition of local linguistic and ethnic diversity is another reason for decentralizing basic education systems in some countries, such as in Oman which has an ethnic and religious diversity (see Chapter Two).

In the Omani context, decentralizing the educational system could be helpful for similar reasons as mentioned above. From an economic perspective, decentralization could be beneficial when education provision and its resource allocation is provided by private schools, thus, financial burdens at a central level would be released, making a cost saving. From a political perspective, democratization could be increased by granting school staff and stakeholders more of a voice in decision-making. From a pedagogical perspective, the quality of teaching and learning could be improved by involving school teaching staff in the decision-making process, as they can address their students' needs and interests. Additionally, from an administration perspective, transferring the responsibility of education to local level might enhance the efficiency and flexibility of educational management in student and teacher selection, recruitment and performance evaluation, thereby reducing school costs and time-consuming processes. However, such issues need to be investigated through the current study.

To sum up, providing greater flexibility, better efficiency and quality, greater consumer choice, more effective accountability, and enhanced citizen participation, are the most

prominent reasons for decentralizing decision-making to the local school site. Additionally, better management of the school's conflicts, reducing expenditure on public education and speeding up the decision-making process, are further arguments for devolving decision-making to school level. However, it could be argued that these rationales may cause negative consequences for some stakeholders, such as MOE officials and those with a high status, who might lose their decision-making powers in certain aspects. This argument will be discussed later in this chapter.

3.3.2.3 Advantages of devolving decision-making authority to schools

Many researchers and scholars advocate the devolvement of decision-making from a central level to the school site for the following benefits. First, transferring the decision-making power to local school sites provides greater autonomy for schools to make their own decisions without interference from the central level, and this may enhance the school's productivity and efficiency (Zadja, 2006).

Those who are in favour of decentralization argued that such devolution may enhance levels of efficiency in the provision of educational services because there is a better understanding at local level of the community's circumstances (Peña, 2007). Devolution permits schools to direct their resources according to their own priorities and local needs. It might increase the performance of teachers and improve learning, resulting in increased levels of parental and student satisfaction. Head-teachers can make improvements in a number of key areas, such as strategic leadership, staffing management, planning, policy making and the allocation of resources in their schools (Zadja, 2006). According to Brown (1990) productivity relates to school effectiveness, efficiency and student equity. He comments that the principal's leadership, school planning, decision making and the monitoring of school activities are factors that facilitate school effectiveness. Schools can benefit from efficiency in managing finance, and thus, running costs can be significantly reduced, especially if a school is cost-effective in meeting its set objectives (Bullock & Thomas, 1997). Also, outputs should match inputs. Good quality inputs may result in greater outcomes.

Moreover, students' equity is assumed as another benefit of the devolution of the decision-making authority. Equity is defined by Coleman and Anderson (2000) as the equal distribution of students in schools according to their learning needs and potential, so they can be treated equally. They believe that parental choice does not necessarily bring equity. However, it may have negative consequences. For instance, wealthy families can pay more than poor families for better quality education, especially in private schools, hence, quality difference may be broader between schools. It may also create a divide in student performance (Dyer & Rose, 2005). Accordingly, decision-

making could be undermined by decentralization. This is a complex and much debated issue and needs to be further studied.

Furthermore, flexibility is another advantage of devolution. Devolving decision-making authority to school level facilitates the controlling of the budget and resources at school level. Schools can make their own plans and then implement new ideas. Principals may have full financial control. They can hire and fire school teaching and non-teaching staff. Bullock and Thomas (1997) mention that the local management of schools provides greater flexibility in decision making, the prioritizing of issues, the purchasing of resources and the allocation of monies. Rondinelli et al. (1990) state that devolution provides administrators more flexibility to apply creative approaches to solve problems and to respond more effectively to community needs, such as adjusting curriculum content to people's desires. Additionally, transferring power to school level increases flexibility to make decisions "faster, more informed, more flexible, and more responsive to local needs" than decisions made at central level (Hanson, 1997, p.6).

Accountability is the other characteristic of decentralization. Devolution allows the administration of the schools full responsibility in making decisions and in the provision of services to schools. Authority and responsibility can be shared among the school's staff, board and parents. Anderson (2005) states that accountability increases autonomy in schools where the lower level can make decisions in relation to school organization, curriculum, staff, financial and resource management, and external relations such as admissions policies. In Australia (Bullock & Thomas, 1997), for instance, school councils have a greater role in making decisions regarding the physical and human resource management.

Moreover, one of the most important benefits of devolution is local stakeholder participation in school management (Ribot, 2002). According to Chi (1992), participative management involves school staff, besides their jobs, to participate in decision-making, setting goals, resolving problems of schools as well as establishing and applying performance standards, and ensuring their school is responding to the citizens' needs and demands. In Chicago, democratic community involvement in schools through local school councils has led to substantial improvement in the classroom (Liontos, 1993). In Britain (Brown, 1991) a school governing board, which consists of parents, teachers, councillors and some others, can participate in school planning and can also become involved in the recruitment of not only the teachers but also the school's principal. They can follow the progress of the school and monitor the school's budget. Thus, devolution strengthens democracy and raises the political participation of the local people (Bernbaum, 2011; Karlsen, 2000; Malpica, 1995; Peña,

2007). Additionally, devolution offers local stakeholders greater power to adapt the curriculum to the needs of their students. They can make decisions about curriculum content, resources and teaching approaches. However, this demands central level to increase school autonomy in order to have the ability to exercise changes effectively. Similarly, the process of devolution and school autonomy in Nicaragua allows parents, as members of the school board, to have the power to hire and fire school principals and teachers. They can manage and allocate the school budget, and make adjustments to the national curriculum (Gershberg, 2002; Winkler & Gershberg, 2000). According to Hayes (1996) and Pashiardis (1994), teachers involvement in the decision-making process enhances the effectiveness of the schools' aims and the quality of decisions. Their involvement makes schools more responsive to local needs. Therefore, devolving decision-making to school level may increase the school stakeholders participation, which in turn would make the school administration, principal and teachers responsive to local preferences (Abebe, 2012; Dunne, Akyeampong & Humphreys, 2007; Parry, 1997), but the schools should have the capacity of enough resources and technical capabilities to respond to their demands (Peña, 2007).

In addition, although there is inadequate evidence in the literature to similar results about the relationship between devolution and learning outcomes (Dyer & Rose, 2005), the devolution of decision-making has a positive impact on student performance. King and Ozler (1998) evaluated the effect of devolving decisions to the school management in a study conducted in schools in Nicaragua using cross-sectional data on students' standardized test scores. The results indicate that students show a positive performance when responsibilities are devolved to the autonomy of the school. Similarly, in Argentina Galiani, Gertler and Schargrodsky (2008) assess the effect of devolution on student performance using school-level data on standardized tests. Their findings revealed that devolution improved test performance in the well administered province. Similar results have been found in Spain as the effects of decentralization (Peña, 2007). Additionally, autonomous private schools in Colombia and Tanzania performed better in standardized tests than public schools (Cox & Jimenez, 1990).

Further, Astiz, Wiseman and Baker (2002) cite four similar advantages of decision-making decentralization, notably in private schools:

1. Being democratic, efficient, and accountable;
2. Being more responsive to the community and to local needs;
3. Being able to empower teachers, parents, and others in the education community while improving the effectiveness of school reform; and

4. Being able to improve school quality and increase funds available for teachers' salaries through competition. (p.70)

In brief, devolution encourages more autonomy, efficiency, flexibility, accountability, creativity, innovation, equity and responsiveness at local level, and therefore it allows schools to improve the quality of learning, as well as raising their achievement levels. Principals would seem to benefit the most from devolution. They have much more authority over the quality and quantity of decisions affecting their schools, and thus they develop their managerial skills, and can choose to update the library with new books, and resource their school with the latest equipment, as well as providing teachers with various teaching aids. They are in a position to recruit full and part time teachers, and can facilitate the involvement of both parents and teachers in decision making which can match the students' needs and desires.

3.3.2.4 Disadvantages of devolving decision-making authority to schools

Devolution does have some weaknesses, especially if it is not applied in the correct manner. Devolution may increase the chances of some people in powerful positions to make decisions for their own private interests or preferences (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2002; Prud'homme, 1995; Treisman, 2002). In other words, they may misuse their decision-making authority, particularly in the absence of central accountability or insufficient central supervision (Miller, 2002). For instance, principals or the chairs of school boards may fire teachers if they are not performing according to their expectation. Additionally, some private schools may increase their tuition fees, which might reduce student enrolment rates at these schools, as some parents may not be able to afford the cost of this education for their children. Further, Gamage and Zajda (2005) argue that inequality in the distribution of school funding increased when power was devolved to regional levels in some countries. Similarly, Brown (1990) highlights a scenario wherein head-teachers may become too dominant, since they would then control everything in the school, and could distribute authority and responsibility inequitably among the school staff. They may also manage funding unequally or improperly. Thus, devolution may increase corruption and contradict policies. Moreover, Peña (2007, p.4) and Prud'homme (1995) argue that corruption in decision-making could be expanded in developing countries where decisions are usually made "on the basis of personal, tribal or political party royalties". This may be relevant in the Omani context as a developing country with similar political parties. Royal families or heads of tribes or even wealthy families could gain more advantages from devolving decision-making to private school authority, particularly as the main aim of the majority of these schools is profit-making. Therefore, it is necessary for a kind of central

accountability to be in place for schools with indirect following-up through supervision visits in order to ensure transparency and honesty at all times in decision making.

In addition, devolving decision-making authority to school level can involve various challenges. Initially, it demands further responsibility from school management, especially school principals whose role becomes more complex and varied (Williams et al., 1997). They act as educational leaders and organizational mangers. Balancing these two functions will be time consuming which may impact their leadership effectiveness. Hence, devolution might hinder school effectiveness if it minimizes the principal's professional leadership.

Another negative consequence of devolution is that it can be a threat to those that are in positions of authority in the central office, hence, they lose their power, authority, responsibility and influence (Brown, 1991; Malpica, 1995). For instance, educational policy makers in the MOE might resist devolving the authority of decision-making, such as for curriculum and assessment, to the Omani private schools because they are afraid of losing control in managing the quality of such areas. The issues of the Omani environment, such as customs, traditions and Islamic values, might not be taken into consideration by the schools when designing or choosing the curriculum.

Despite some negative consequences of devolution, decision-making may gradually be devolved to the authority of Omani private schools due to various benefits. However, caution should be taken into account if decision-making is decentralized to these schools as this might result in various negative consequences. Positive and negative consequences of devolving decision-making in this study's context need careful consideration. Besides, this reform can be evaluated in order to make any adaptations consistent with the Omani culture and community needs and demands. Thus, in order to implement decision-making devolution in schools in the right way, an effective approach is required. One of the most popular used at school level is known as School Based Management (SBM), which will be discussed in the next section.

3.4 SBM as a mean of improving decision-making

SBM is considered as one of the most significant strategies and international trends of implementing the education decentralization reform. It has been adopted in several countries around the world; in developed countries such as New Zealand, Australia, the USA, the UK, and most Latin American countries; and developing countries including Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Thailand and Lebanon. (Bandur, 2008; Barrera-Osorio, Fasih, Patrinos & Santibáñez, 2009; Cranston, 2001; Walker, 2000; World Bank, 2008).

SBM was implemented to devolve the power of decision making from central to school level, particularly in the management of school budgets, curriculum, and personnel decisions in order to improve educational practices (Hanson, 1990; Mohrman & Wohlstetter, 1994; Czubaj, 1999). Hence, enhancing decision-making devolution to local school level is the major element of the SBM.

Since the SBM is an approach for the provision of greater decision-making authority to schools, it might be one of the best strategies that could be benefited from in the process of devolving decision-making authority to Omani private schools, if this authority was to be granted to such schools. Conversely, this does not mean to minimize the importance of other decentralized approaches. Thus, this section presents an overview of SBM, and provides the definition, characteristics and forms of SBM. It discusses the requirements of SBM implementation, formation of school council and decision-making styles.

3.4.1 Definition of SBM

Different meanings or names are associated with SBM, such as self-managing schools, the autonomous school concept, independent schools, site-based management, school autonomy, local management, site-based decision-making, school based budgeting, school based curriculum development and administrative decentralization (Bandur, 2008; Elmelegy, 2015; Moore, 2009). All these concepts refer to the authority devolution from the central Ministry to local school sites.

Educational researchers have a similar definition of SBM. They concentrate on devolving the decision making authority to school level. Anderson (2006) defines SBM as "the shifting of decision-making authority from the district office to individual schools" (p.223). Likewise, Caldwell (2005) defines SBM as "the systematic decentralization to the school level of authority and responsibility to make decisions on significant matters related to school operations within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards, and accountability" (p.1). He states that school autonomy and shared decision-making are central themes in this educational reform initiative. This means that school stakeholders can participate in the decision-making process, such as principals, teachers, parents, students, school community administration and different school communities. They have the flexibility and authority to make school level decisions. Additionally, Gertler, Patrinos and Rubio-Codina (2007) explain SBM as a reform movement that allows schools more authority to make decisions about personnel, material, and financial resource management.

Moreover, Gamage (1996) defines SBM as:

A pragmatic approach to a formal alteration of the bureaucratic model of school administration with a more democratic structure. It identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement relying on the redistribution of decision-making authority through which improvements in a school are stimulated and sustained. (p.65)

Therefore, these definitions are all similar in meaning, and indicate that SBM grants school leaders with school stakeholder participation to have more autonomy and power in decision-making over different school activities for the purpose of achieving improvement in schools. The SBM system emphasizes that each school is the main authority in decision-making (Barrera et al., 2009).

3.4.2 Characteristics of SBM

As previously noted, devolving authority from the central Ministry to school level is the main feature of the SBM. Greater responsibility and flexibility are granted to school management. Several reasons are cited by researchers for utilizing SBM in schools. Better school management and governance plus teaching and learning improvements are the main reasons for implementing SBM. It promotes decision-making effectiveness and improves teaching and learning processes (Caldwell & Harris, 2008; World Bank, 2008) as well as enhances transparency and accountability of school administration (Bandur, 2008). Hence, this may reduce any chances of corruption (Barrera et al., 2009), which may prove the SBM to be an acceptable reform in decision-making devolution to private schools. Additionally, more effective and efficient use of school resources with low cost, and improvement in student achievement and performance are behind SBM implementation. These outcomes may not be achieved without local school stakeholder participation, which is considered as one of the most important benefits of implementing SBM. Teachers, parents and other community school members are empowered in decision-making. They can make the best decision according to their needs (Briggs & Wohlstetter, 2003; Gamage, 1993; Gamage, 2006; Stevenson, 2001).

Further advantages of SBM are citied by different researchers and reports (Al Ghifelli & Ghani, 2014; Elmelegy, 2015; Gertler, Patrinos & Rubio-Codina, 2007; Leithwood & Manzies, 1998; Liontos, 1993; Oswald, 1995; World Bank, 2008) including the following:

- Increasing communication among all local stakeholders which causes a more collaborative relationship and high contentment level;
- Making the school environment more welcoming and open as the local community and society has participated in its management;

- Improving business and managerial processes in schools;
- Providing school administration more autonomy over school affairs.
- Improving the value and quality of decisions;
- Augmenting the reception of a decision and its implementation;
- Boosting staff morale, dedication, and cooperation;
- Fostering trust that will improve school-wide as school personnel have gained a greater understanding of the complexities involved with school based management, and principals learned to revere the judgments of their school;
- Facilitating the acquisition of new skills for staff and administrators; and
- Enhancing school efficiency by providing incentives for efficient school staff.

Overall, SBM strengthens teachers and parents involvement in making school decisions, increases efficiency in the use of personnel and resources, develops professional culture among teachers and enhances student achievement (Al Ghifelli & Ghani, 2014; Cranston, 2001). Thus, this could be utilized in Omani private schools if decision-making is devolved to individual schools.

3.4.3 Requirements of SBM implementation

There are several factors that should be considered to ensure the success of SBM. First, the central Ministry has to establish a legislative basis that grants the individual schools authority for making school decisions in order to facilitate the implementation of SBM. A centrally-determined framework should specify the decentralized decision-making areas. Educational researches confirm that schools should be granted more autonomy in relation to finances and management with less control from the central Ministry in order to implement SBM (Anderson, 2006; Bandur, 2008; Gamage, 2006). The central role is to provide technical and material support for schools (Hall & Galluzzo, 1991; Walker, 2000). Open communication channels are also important between central policy makers, who should be supportive of the reform, and people in school administration. Regular meetings between them, as well as between the school's members, should be held at an appropriate time and in a non-threatening manner (Blasé & Blasé, 2001).

Another important point added by Hall and Galluzzo (1991) in SBM implementation is building trust, either between the higher authority in the Ministry and school management, or among school board members. Further, the implementation of SBM requires the abdication of authority as well as more flexibility from those who have the power to make school decisions, such as principals, in order to allow other school stakeholders to participate in decision-making (Bandur, 2008; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004). To achieve this, formulating a school board, council or

committee comprising with relevant members of school stakeholders or educational practitioners is necessary in SBM implementation (Bandur, 2008; Barrera et al., 2009).

Moreover, understanding the meaning and process of SBM implementation is prerequisite of its success. Members of the school board have to understand their roles, responsibilities, and accountability. For example, the school community needs to understand whether they can solely provide advice, or if they can make decisions (Hall & Galluzzo, 1991). Additionally, principals and other school leaders need training in the areas of decision making. They need training in school leadership, curriculum design, school planning and strategic development in order to implement this strategy properly (Bandur, 2008; Gamage & Sooksomchitra, 2004). Although the experience of non-educational members of a school board is useful, they should acquire adequate knowledge of educational issues besides decision-making functioning (Bandur, 2008).

The last factor to ensure the success of SBM is that schools should be held accountable for the results of their actions and decisions made. A central accountability system should be built, and controlled centrally. Progress and annual reports should be submitted by the school principal or the head of the school board to the centre or to the school community (Bandur, 2008). More details about accountability will be presented at the end of this section. Consequently, if these requirements would be taken into account, the process of decision-making devolution would probably be successful.

3.4.4 Forms of SBM

According to Barrera et al. (2009) and the World Bank (2008), SBM can be classified into various different forms in terms of *how much decision-making authority devolves to school level* (the degree) and *who has the power to make decisions* (the people). Hence, this implies that the implementation of decision-making decentralization reform differs from one country to another, as well as from one school to another. This section describes the types and models of SBM.

3.4.4.1 SBM types

The implementation of SBM as a continuum of educational reform varies from one country to another depending on the degree of autonomy devolved to school level over different school activities. It can be ranged, as Table (6) reveals, from a *weak* to *strong* continuum autonomy. In weak SBM reforms, on the one hand, schools are granted limited autonomy and decision-making authority over specific areas, such as improving school planning and instructional methods. Conversely, on the other hand, in some countries schools have no autonomy, such as Argentina and Chile, where the system is decentralized to local districts and municipalities. In contrast, schools in the strong reforms are autonomous, usually receiving governmental funds and have full authority

and responsibility over all school decisions, including the management of financial and educational issues, which are made by the school principal and other administrators (ibid). For example, schools with limited autonomy can be found in Mexico. Publicly financed private schools, as in Denmark and the Netherlands, public schools as in the UK, and charter schools as in some US states, are examples of schools which have strong autonomy (Abu-Duhou, 1999). The following table clarifies the degree of decision-making devolution in several countries (Al Ghifelli, 2014, p.39; Barrera et al., 2009, p.22; World Bank, 2008, p.7).

Table 6: Types of SBM reforms implemented in different countries

The type of SBM reform	Autonomy (the degree of decision-making power)	Countries
Weak	Schools have no autonomy	Argentina and Chile
	Schools have very limited autonomy over school matters, especially for planning and instruction, but do not have autonomy to make any administrative or curricular decisions.	Czech Republic and Mexico
Moderate	Schools have limited autonomy regarding planning, instruction and resource controlling and financing. School councils have been established, but serve only in an advisory role.	Brazil, Canada, Thailand Virginia
Somewhat strong	Councils have autonomy to hire/fire teachers and principals and to set curricula, plus autonomy over school affairs including planning, instruction, finances and control of resources.	USA (Chicago/New York), Spain, UK (LM)
Strong	Councils have autonomy to hire/fire teachers and principals and to set curricula and control substantial resources. Schools receive lump-sum funding.	Australia, El Salvador Guatemala, Ghana Honduras, Hong Kong, China, Madagascar, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Rwanda, Niger, UK(GM)
Very strong	Parental or community control of schools and any choice of models, in	Denmark, Netherlands, Qatar

	which parents or others can create a school. School councils/administrators have the power to make decisions over the operational, financial, and educational management of schools. These schools are publicly funded and privately run.	

LM = locally managed schools, and GM = grant-maintained schools

To some extent, it is worth indicating that a similar degree of power and choice is granted to parents in both private and public schools, which are publicly funded. Currently in the Omani context, according to the researcher's experience, the autonomy granted to some public schools can be classified as moderate, while private school autonomy is weak. Nonetheless, the Omani education system could benefit from SBM reform applied in such international contexts with adaptation according to its cultural context. The current study will specify the degree of decision-making power and the areas that could be granted to private schools.

3.4.4.2 SBM models

SBM can be subdivided into four models in terms of who is granted decision-making authority in any SBM reform when it is devolved to school level, and how much decision-making authority they have, and over what educational areas they may exercise that power. These four models are discussed, as follows (Barrera et al., 2009, p.23-24; World Bank, 2008, p.8; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998, p.235):

1. *Administrative Control SBM*:

In this model, the decision-making power is devolved to the school principal who is more accountable to the central Ministry. It increases the efficiency of expenditure on personnel and curriculum.

2. *Professional Control SBM*:

In this form, the power of decision-making is mainly in the hands of school teachers. They are motivated to perform better by being allowed to participate in the school decision-making process as they have *knowledge of what the school needs at classroom level*. Thus, this may *lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness in teaching*.

3. *Community Control SBM:*

The main power of decision-making in this model is devolved to community members, especially parents, who can make decisions according to their needs and preferences over different school activities, such as the curriculum. The principal and teachers are more responsive to local needs. Their own demands and desires are taken into account when making decisions.

4. *Balanced Control SBM:*

The authority of decision-making in this model is shared between teachers and parents, who are the main school stakeholders. The benefits of this model include using teachers' knowledge to enhance school management, and giving more accountability of the school to parents.

However, it could be argued that decisions may not be successfully made without participation from all school stakeholders, especially when a new reform is introduced. For example, principals cannot work on their own for practical reasons. Assistance from other people, such as teachers and parents, is necessary for principals in order to make school decisions. Therefore, each model of SBM described above might not work well on its own without participation from all school stakeholders.

Consequently, researchers Barrera et al. (2009), suggest another form of SBM which is a blend of the four models as previously discussed. In this blended model, a school council, board or committee of school management is formed, which consists of various different members of the school's stakeholders. The next section will focus on this blended model.

3.4.5 Formation of a school council

In order to enhance the local participatory decision-making authority, school communities are empowered to establish a school council, board, governor or committee comprising of relevant school stakeholders. Its authority differs between schools, depending on the type of SBM reform. The school council acts as a governing body which has greater power and authority to manage the school's affairs within a clearly defined central framework. It can play an important role in making the school's decisions. It also has different functions (Bandur, 2008; Beatriz, Deborah & Hunter, 2008, p.79).

Members of a school council can vary from one school to another, depending on the type and size of the school (Bandur, 2008). The principal is the main member of the council, who reports "on the progress on the implementation of the policies adopted

and decisions made by the governing body at its meetings" (Gamage & Zajda, 2005, p.17). It also consists of elected representatives of school administrators and teaching staff, parents, and nominated community representatives. Also, a student could be elected as a member if the school has a secondary level (Gamage,1996). For example, the school council in all Chicago public schools in the USA, has a student representative member with no voting right. Barrera et al. (2009) argue that the community representative can be an agreed member of the public and not a parent of a student in the school.

Regarding the decision-making areas, SBM reform devolves authority over different school activities. School council has the power to make decisions on different schools issues, depending on the SBM type introduced. It may have the decision-making authority in areas of school "budget (allocating budget), personnel management (hiring and firing teachers and other school staff), pedagogy (developing curriculum), maintenance and infrastructure (procuring textbooks and other educational materials, improving infrastructure), and monitoring and evaluation (monitoring and evaluating teacher performance and student learning outcomes)" (Barrera et al., 2009, p.16).

3.4.6 Styles of decision-making participation

Leadership is vital for school improvement (Fullan, 2014) and effectiveness (Hariri, Monypenny & Prideaux, 2012). It improves the participatory decision-making process and collaborative leadership between school members (Harris, 2002). Ugurlu (2013) and Abu-Shawish (2016) argue that leaders should have the ability to involve concerned participants who are able to deal with the problem in order to make a positive decision. Additionally, they should have the ability to use whichever decision-making style is deemed most appropriate with the situation they are dealing with, and "according to the features of the problem to be solved, the decision processes adopted, and subordinates' acceptance to the decision made" (Abu-Shawish, 2016, p.49). Thus, using an effective decision-making style plays a significant role in making improvements in schools. However, there is no a specific and unique style to make decisions which suits all case demands (Ugurlu, 2013).

Participative decision-making as a leadership style has been used widely in recent years in decentralized education systems (Hammad, 2017; Mokoena, 2011; Spillane, 2005), which empowers school staff to contribute to school improvements. According to Lichtenstein (2000) subordinates are completely trusted by their leaders to participate in decision-making processes. Many decisions are made in groups. Besides, the cultures of participatory decision-making, as indicated by Van Loveren (2007), highlight "collective responsibility, joint decision-making, and values and a common mission"

(p.3). Similarly, Abu-Shawish (2016, p.48) confirms that "participation is concerned with joint decision-making, democratic management, decentralization, and consultation" where authority is transmitted from central to local level. Contextually, according to Almoharby (2010), participative decision-making, which is known as *Shuratic decision making*, is the basic Islamic governance system in Oman, and is practiced in different aspects of management.

Owens (2003) and Vroom and Jago (1988) identify different styles of decision-making that may be helpful for school leaders to deal with different situations. Leaders can select the most appropriate style to involve their staff in the decision-making process. They can be categorized into three styles; autocratic, consultative and group. With autocratic decision-making, leaders have full power in making decisions and do not require any participation from their employees, especially if they are specialist and have adequate information about the problem, but otherwise, they may inform them about the issue in order to gain relevant and adequate information, but the final decision is down to the school's leaders. Secondly, consultative decision-making is where the principal, as the school leader, seeks assistance from school staff or stakeholders in order to solve a problem. First, they notify school staff and/or stakeholders individually or in groups, and inform them about the school's issue in order to gain from their suggestions and advice. Then, the principal can make the decision based on the different ideas they have gathered. In both the autocratic and consultative decision-making styles, leaders are the key decision makers, but with the employees' voices being heard, although it is not necessary to get their subordinates' agreement in this decision-making process. However, leaders in the group decision-making style meet with their organization's employees in groups to explain the problem or issue in detail. They all then discuss it and propose ideas and different recommendations to solve it, with the best solution being chosen with their agreement. Thus, the decision is shared in this decision-making style.

In addition, another style was suggested by Vroom and Jago (1988), in which managers delegate full power to their employees for the responsibility to make decisions without their influence. The leaders play the role of facilitator by providing their employees with sufficient information about the situation or problem and clarifying any limits that they need to stay within.

In brief, participatory decision-making is useful to satisfy and motivate school stakeholders through empowering them in the collaborative decision making process, which in turn achieves higher performance levels in schools. However, the use of the

decision-making style may vary from one problem or situation to another, and from one school to another, however the group style might be more preferable.

3.4.7 Accountability system

Accountability is another link to autonomy in SBM. Making schools more accountable and transparent in their management style is one of the main aims of introducing SBM (World Bank, 2008). Anderson (2005) categorizes accountability in the implementation of SBM into three types. First, school management members have to be responsible for following regulations, and be accountable to the educational authorities. Second, they have to be accountable for adhering to criteria and accountable to their counterparts. Third, they must be accountable for students' schooling and to the general community. Additionally, empowering school stakeholders to make shared decisions strengthens and facilitates these kinds of accountability, and thus, transparency increases; which in turn, improves students' outcomes and reduces mistakes and corruption in schools (Elmelegy, 2015; World Bank, 2008). Elmelegy (2015) claims that the implementation of an accountability system in schools may result in improvement in the educators' performance towards achieving the school's goals. Hess (1999) conducted a longitudinal study of 14 Chicago public schools using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. One of his findings was that there is a link between the accountability of the local school council and making schools improvements.

To conclude, it seems that for the popularity of SBM and its effectiveness in decision-making devolution, it could be useful in the process of decision-making devolution and be adopted in Omani private schools if decision-making can be decentralized to these schools. However, transferring from one system to another, as a change, is not an easy process. Changing from centralization to other forms of decentralization could encounter various challenges. It might be opposed by different education stakeholders, thus, the management of change in educational organizations is important in order to overcome unexpected difficulties or problems, and to make these organizations perform effectively. The management of change in the education system will be described in detail at the end of this chapter. The next section outlines the previous studies on the devolution of decision-making authority and its strategy, such as the SBM system.

3.5 Studies of the devolution of decision-making authority

Educational decentralization has been considered by many researchers. Several studies around the world have been carried out to look at the importance and effectiveness of decentralized education in general, and specifically about the

devolution of decision-making to school authority through examining decentralized approaches such as the SBM. Additionally, other studies have been conducted to explore decision-making domains. Exploring such international studies is necessary to find out the issues related to Omani context and why they should be significant to its education system. Some examples of studies conducted in different countries, including Arab countries, on educational devolution will be summarized.

The majority of studies in most developing countries, such as the UK, USA, Denmark and Australia, indicate that the government encourages decentralized education system implementation. The decision-making process is participated in, shared, and distributed among school staff and stakeholders. In Los Angeles, Wohlsetter and Chau (2003) examined the relationships between autonomy, charter schools, and research based best practices in classrooms. Their qualitative study found that the charter schools are more autonomous because of having more control over personnel and process decision, than traditional public schools.

In Latin America, King and Özler (1998) conducted a study to analyse the effect of devolving the authority of decision-making to school level on student outcomes by studying the Nicaraguan Autonomous School Program, in which student outcomes were compared between centralized and decentralized schools using students' test scores. They found that there is a significant and a positive correlation between school autonomy and students outcomes. Their findings revealed that improvements in student outcomes are recognized when the school administration has the power to make decisions about staffing, evaluating teachers and monitoring schools. Similarly, Galiani and Schargrodsky (2001) compared the difference in exam results between public and private school students in their research conducted in Argentina. They found that student outcomes could be improved when decision-making decentralization is employed by school management.

However, unlike these two previous studies, Jimenez and Sawada (1999) did not come to the same conclusion when they made an analysis of a decentralized educational program; El Salvador's Community-Managed Schools Program. Their results indicate that there is not any statistically significant impact of decentralization on the rates of student attendance or standardized exam results. Additionally, the empirical analysis on educational decentralization in Egypt conducted by Nasser-Ghodsi and Owen (2006) has similar findings from Jimenez and Sawada's study. Their study shows there is no relationship between decentralization and student outcomes.

In Greece, Sarafidou and Chatziioannidis (2013) explored the participation of Greek primary school teachers in three decision-making domains; managerial issues, student

issues, and teacher issues, using a quantitative study based on a questionnaire. They found high levels of actual participation in decisions areas related to students' and teachers' issues, but low level participation in the managerial area. On the other hand, the study revealed teachers were becoming more involved in managerial issues than before, due to better leadership and higher collegiality in schools.

Madsen (1997) conducted a case study about leadership in three decentralized private schools in the US. The aim of this qualitative study is to determine the type of leadership that the private school principal has to follow, and to find out the administrative practice for all citizens in a facilitated self-management of schools. Encouragement in long-term planning participation, expanding the ability of the participants to understand the educational process, developing the capacity of individuals to participate in school management, and giving opportunity for stakeholders to participate in making school's decisions, are the main findings of this study.

On the other hand, the decision-making process in some European schools has not devolved as yet. For example, Androniceanu and Ristea (2014) explored the decision making process in 18 Romanian public high schools which apply a decentralized educational system. The questionnaire results indicated that the process of decision-making still remains highly centralized at the central higher level. The principals and school council have restricted autonomy in many key decision areas. The school board's members made school decisions at group meetings with the majority of votes, depending on the MOE policy, with less involvement of students and their parents in the decision-making process. The study recommended increasing responsibilities for local society towards developing school requirements, granting school administration the authority to design the curriculum according to students' abilities and particularities of local community, minimizing central interferences in inspecting the management of school personnel, and constantly evaluating the implications of stakeholders in the process of school decision-making.

In addition, many studies have been conducted in Asian countries about decision-making authority. Ho (2006) examined and compared several forms of educational decentralization in three Asian countries - Japan, Hong Kong and Korea, using the data gathered from the Programme for International Student Assessment. This study also investigated which different areas of decision-making are decentralized to these three communities, plus who the key decision makers are. The study employed four clustering analyses; "highly centralized, school-driven, teacher-driven, and highly decentralized" (p.590), to find out the nature and extent of the education systems'

decentralization in the three countries. The study found Hong Kong applied the most dominant form of decentralization; school-driven. Decisions are made by the schools themselves, however, a centralized system has been applied in Japan and Korea, where decisions are made from authorities externally from the school. Also, the findings revealed that the level of teacher involvement in the decision-making process was low in all the three Asian countries. Regarding the authority of decision areas, the study found curriculum, student affairs, and budget allocation were devolved to the school authority in all three countries, while salary setting was centralized. The results displayed Hong Kong as having the highest level of school decentralization in staffing issues, whereas Korea revealed the highest level of autonomy in curriculum and instruction. Additionally, the study indicated that the principal was the key person in the decision-making process in all three of the Asian educational systems.

In Taiwan, the relationship between the involvement of high school teachers in the decision-making process and school effectiveness was examined in a study conducted by Fung Wu and Tseng (2005). The researchers reviewed the literature relating to decision-making participation and effectiveness in schools, plus employed a questionnaire which included different decision areas. The findings revealed there was a positive correlation between teachers' involvement in different decision-making areas and school effectiveness. The study also found that public school teachers were more involved in the decision-making process than private school teachers. The study suggested more opportunities of decision-making participation should be provided to Taiwanese teachers in all schools, regardless of size, including private schools. They should be involved in all decision areas, including administrative.

Joshee (1994) conducted a qualitative study in Nepal to compare private and public schools' perceptions about the central interference in school administration, students' behaviour, and qualifying and training teachers. She interviewed (16) participants consisting of students, teachers, principals, and parents. The findings indicated that private schools faced obstacles because of external interference. The study suggested that school principals should have the autonomy and freedom to make decisions about their schools.

A case study conducted by Lam (2006) in Hong Kong examined six teachers' perceptions from two secondary schools on the leadership roles of principals under SBM. The study employed a qualitative design based on semi-structured interviews as a major method, and a supplement one of observations, field notes and documentary analysis. The study revealed that authority devolution led to more effective decision making with the involvement of school stakeholders, especially teachers. It also

created changes in the structure of school administration and the role of principals and teachers with more responsibility and accountability of the school, as well as an increase in teachers' workloads. Besides this, the study indicated the need for principals to have "good leadership, management, interpersonal, communication and negotiation skills with all stakeholders" (p.182).

Bandur (2008) carried out a qualitative and quantitative empirical study in Indonesia to explore the effects of devolving authority and responsibility to a school site as a recent educational reform by using SBM. The study also identified the challenges faced by school council members in the implementation of SBM. The results of the survey, semi-structures and focused group interviews indicated the importance of transferring authority and power to school level, which has led to improved school performance in the teaching and learning process and student achievement. Devolution has created various changes in school cultures and has also increased partnerships between school stakeholders in decision-making participation in several areas of "setting a school mission, shared-vision, annual programs, school budget, school textbooks, school buildings, school-based curriculum and even students' discipline policies" (p.845). The study recommends governments for establishing a legislative basis and clear-cut central regulations for transferring decision making authority to school management. The study suggests that there should be continuous training and/or regular workshops on school leadership and management, especially for the school council members to clarify their responsibility, authority and power. Additionally, the study proposed the need for increased funding from governments to affect more improvements in school effectiveness.

Another quantitative study in Indonesia conducted by Chen (2011) examined the key aspects of SBM practices, and their impact on the quality of education through "utilizing a conceptual framework of an accountability system of public service delivery" (p.2). The findings revealed that the SBM has started to assist schools in making the appropriate decisions on resource allocation, and employing extra (non-civil servant) teachers, plus creating a positive learning environment, including rising rates of teacher attendance. The researcher found that these aspects had important a positive impact on students' schooling outcomes. The study also indicated that Indonesian schools were more controlled by both teachers and principals, but the level of other school stakeholders' participation, especially parents, was low.

In Thailand, Gamage and Sooksomchitra (2004) conducted a research project to evaluate the effectiveness of decentralization and SBM reforms with local participation. The research methodology consists of qualitative and quantitative methods. An

empirical survey was applied for 1,000 school board members and semi-structured interviews were carried out with relevant stakeholders. The findings indicate that there is support for the reforms between principals and board members, but they need continuous training in educational leadership and management.

Carr-Hil, Rolleston and Schendel (2016) carried out a systematic review study about the school-based decision-making effects on educational outputs in low and middle income countries. The findings revealed that devolving decision-making to school level has somehow had a beneficial effect on reducing the number of student drop-outs and repetition. The study also found positive and significant improvements in student language and math test scores. However, the researchers did not find any evidence regarding significant effects on teacher attendance, except in countries of high decentralization. They found that the reforms of decision-making devolution have a stronger effect on students from wealthier and more educated families, whereas they are less effective in disadvantaged communities that have a low level of education and status. Additionally, the study indicated decision-making devolution is ineffective when there is no actively collaborative decision-making among school community members. The researchers suggested further research to be conducted qualitatively on school-based decision-making in general and particularly an analysis of the positive and negative impacts of decision-making devolution reforms.

Some studies were carried out in various Arab countries, most of which confirmed that strict central regulations and undemocratic decision-making styles are implemented in most of these countries, especially in the Middle East (Boussif, 2010). This is due to the belief of some Arab managers, who feel that their staff are "lazy, do not want to take responsibility, prefer to follow instructions, their primary motivator to work is money and job security, and that managers have to have the complete authority and apply some punishment rules in order to make their subordinates accomplish their goals" (McGregor as cited in Abu-Shawish, 2016, p.61). For example, the education system in Egypt was described as highly centralized in studies conducted by researchers (Emira, 2010; Gahin, 2001, Hammad & Norris 2009, Hammad, 2017). A recent Egyptian study was carried out by Hammad (2017), to examine the gap between actual and desired decision areas as a potential factor influencing teacher involvement in making decisions in Egyptian schools. The data were collected qualitatively, based on semi-structured interviews of 85 school administrators and teachers, as well as the minutes of their school board and board of trustees' meetings as documents. His findings indicated that decisions were made centrally, which are insignificant and irrelevant to teachers' concerns. The study recommended that teachers should be involved in decision-making areas that are relevant to their interests, including the

curriculum and student discipline policy. The study also suggested that the decision-making authority should be devolved to school level in order to increase the participative decision-making process exercised by school administrators and teachers.

In Lebanon, Najjar (2009) carried out a case study about the effectiveness of management in private schools. He compared private and public school management using a qualitative approach based on structured interviews, documentary analysis and observation work. The study revealed that private schools are more efficient in management because they have greater freedom to make decisions based on the input of all staff, and not only by the principal. They are also a more conducive and less punitive culture for learning due to their greater accountability to parents.

In Palestine, Mansoor (2004) conducted a quantitative study aiming at examining the perceptions of schools principals about specific areas, including curricula, teaching methods, staff and student affairs, school facilities and financial affairs, and whether the authority of decision-making should be centralized or decentralized at school level. His questionnaire's results indicated that 44 per cent of the principals preferred the decision-making of teaching methods, students affairs, school facilities and financial affairs to be devolved to the school's authority, while decisions regarding staff affairs and curriculum issues should be made at central level.

Unfortunately, there are very few studies conducted in the Gulf countries regarding decision-making devolution. For example, Abu-Shawish (2016) conducted a quantitative and qualitative study in Qatar to investigate high school administrators' and teachers' views concerning school teachers' involvement in decision-making areas related to "educational goals and policies, curriculum and instruction, schools' administrative policies for teachers, and for students" (p.2). The researcher used a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to gather her data, and found that school teachers should be involved in the majority of areas related to the key decision-making areas mentioned above, particularly the decision areas dealing with the school's "educational goals and policies, curriculum and administrative policies for students" (p.2).

In addition, another quantitative study conducted in Qatar by Al-Derhim (1984) found that the Qatari MOE impose a highly centralized structure in suburban school administration. Similar results from a quantitative study conducted by Sadiq (1985) revealed that schools' principals and teachers were not allowed to be involved in the decision-making process because of the centralized educational system in Qatar. Their opinions were neglected when the MOE made educational decisions which were

ineffective, inadequate and not responsive to the school's needs, as perceived by principals.

Moreover, the perspectives of Qatari school principals and officials from the central level were compared in a quantitative study undertaken by Al-Musleh (1988), regarding the principal involvement in educational decision-making. The questionnaire's results revealed that both central and local levels should have an equal participation degree in the decision-making process, and that much of the educational decisions should be devolved to the principals' authority. The study proposed that decision-making should be made by all Qatari people concerned with educational decisions. The researcher suggested that similar research should be conducted to discover other school members' opinions, such as teachers, about what their involvement in the decision-making process should be in the Qatari educational system.

A descriptive quantitative study was conducted by Al-Ghafli and Al Humaidi (2013) in the UAE to explore the most important constraints encountered by Al Ain public school principals in the school decision-making process. The questionnaire's results revealed there were personal, organizational and social constraints that restrained principals from making such decisions. The most effective restrictions were organizational, including the limited authority granted to principals, inadequate support from central level to principals, and strict educational legislation, regulations and laws. With regard to personal constraints, the study found that principals faced difficulties in making school decisions because of psychological stress and an increasing work burden, as well as low morale among teaching and administrative staff. Concerning social constraints, the researcher found that principals encountered barriers in decision-making because of the ineffective performance of school councils and organizations, limited leisure and entertainment opportunities for the principals, and weak relationships among the school community. The study suggested that the central level should devolve more of the decision-making authority to school principals, with financial support and sufficient training. Also, the study suggests the need future studies on the participation of school principals in decision-making at central level.

Furthermore, another piece of descriptive quantitative research was carried out by Al Kaabi (2015) to investigate the perceptions of different public school staff in the UAE on the areas of SBM practices. The findings indicated that there was greater school staff participation in decision-making in the areas where they have more authority, than those areas with limited or no authority. The study also revealed that there was a strong desire from the staff to participate in the decision-making process in most areas, especially those related to teaching. The study suggested conducting similar studies in

private schools as this study focused only on the areas of SBM application in public schools.

Similar to Al-Ghafli and Al Humaidi (2013), Al Seesi and Al Arawi's (2014) quantitative study indicated that there were administrative, financial and human obstacles facing the implementation of SBM in girls' primary public schools in Al-Madinah Al-Munawarah in Saudi Arabia to a medium degree. The administrative constraints, such as limited power granted to the school headmistress, inflexibility in the application of certain laws and regulations, weak communication channels between the school and the MOE, and financial obstacles such as a lack of material resources for school development were at a high degree. Conversely, the human obstacles, like the weakness of the MOE leaders' conviction about the importance of devolving authority and the scarcity of qualified school leaders were at a medium degree. The study suggested the need to move towards decentralization, giving additional authority to school principals, and providing human and financial resources.

Moreover, Jubran and Al-Shammari (2011) investigated the possibility of implementing school self-management in public schools from the perceptions of educational leaders in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The study adopted an analytical descriptive approach based on a questionnaire distributed to 307 school principals, and interviews composed of eight open-ended questions, conducted with seven undersecretaries at the MOE. The findings revealed a very high degree of the potential implementation of school self-management in Saudi public schools in the domains of students' affairs, financial affairs, educational supervision, educational objectives, and a high degree in the areas of the school building, and staff and teachers' affairs. Conversely, the study indicated that curriculum issues decisions should be made by the MOE, particularly selecting textbooks for each subject. The researchers suggested that the schools should be involved in the process of decision-making, and granted them the authority to make decisions in the areas of student affairs, financial affairs, educational supervision, and educational objectives.

Within the Omani context, however, there has only been one qualitative, multiple-case study conducted to date concerning decision-making decentralization. Al-Ghefeili (2014) investigated and analysed school community views, and the understanding of SBM implementation in selected Omani public schools, in Al-Batinah Governorate. The researcher gathered the data by using interviews, observation and documents analysis methods. The findings revealed that SBM implementation increased autonomy at school site within the MOE's policy over educational, financial, and personnel issues. Conversely, the school authority over other school operations is limited. Additionally,

the researcher found that participants expressed different views of understanding SBM implementation as a strategy to empower the school community in managing their resources independently. They indicated the usefulness of implementing SBM in schools, which can increase the school community's involvement in the decision-making process.

Moreover, the study indicated that schools faced difficulties and challenges in implementing SBM including a lack of information and training programs, and lack of autonomy as the final decision of the schools' matters, which were made at central level. The researcher suggested a model to facilitate SBM implementation in schools. He also recommended further research in decision-making decentralization.

To summarize, it would appear that the majority of studies cited concur the importance of devolving decision-making to school level. They reveal that schools benefit greatly from devolving decision-making to their authority. Additionally, they recommend increasing the school stakeholders' involvement in the decision-making process. They should have more of a voice and control, especially in teaching and learning decisions. They should also be trained in different skills, and should understand their responsibility and authority. However, the results from various previous studies, such as Jimenez and Sawada (1999) and Nasser-Ghodsi and Owen (2006), on the effects of decentralization on student outputs, reveal that the devolution of decision-making to schools does not always have positive effects on student outcomes. Hence, it could be argued that decentralization has an ambiguous and insignificant impact as there are no links between decentralizing decision-making and learning outcomes. Furthermore, despite decentralization being introduced in various countries, including Arab societies, some studies indicated that not all decision areas should be devolved to the schools' authority, such as curriculum and school staff issues, especially in Palestine, UAE and KSA. Thus, the current study will find out how these international studies are relevant to Omani context and whether or not their findings can be generalized to Omani private schools. This needs in depth comparative analysis to find out the reasons for similarities and differences, and what issues that are unique to Omani context.

In addition, the majority of citied studies concentrate on investigating decentralization in public schools, so there is a dearth of private school studies. Additionally, none of these studies, except one, examined decision-making devolution from the education stakeholders' perspectives at both levels, central and school. Finally, there is scarcity of Omani studies concerning decision-making decentralization. Thus, there is a need to investigate the decision-making authority in Omani private schools. The next section discusses the change management in the educational system.

3.6 Change management in education

Continuous improvement practices are very important for any educational organization to adapt to surrounding technological and economical changes, and thus, to achieve effectiveness (Rosenblatt, 2004). These improvements cannot be achieved successfully without making changes, which require being managed effectively (Mullins, 2010). Introducing the reform of decision-making devolution requires making changes in different facets in the school structure, teaching and learning process, resources and educational legislation. Additionally, all those involved have to adapt to this change. They should be qualified, skilful and knowledgeable in order to manage difficulties or problems effectively.

This section reviews the literature related to the management of change in education. It starts with the meaning of change and management in education. The importance of change management and the process of change will be covered. Issues that relate to resistance to change, including types and causes of resistance will be discussed. It concludes with a review of the strategies used to reduce resistance to change.

3.6.1 The concept of change and management in education

Change has several definitions. Its meaning differs from one organization to another. Researchers indicate that change is found to be normal in our community. It is connected with instable situations, and transfers from a present condition to an alternative future one. It is a process of transformation (Whitaker, 1993).

A clear definition of educational change is rare to find. However, successful change should have a clear meaning as argued by Marris (2014). Morrison (1998) defines educational change as an on-going and dynamic process of evolution. It is affected by external and internal factors or forces to generate new situations. It involves people, either individuals or groups, in organizations. Similarly, Altrichter (2000) identifies educational change as a process or a product. It is a variable. It can be individual or collective, an event or a pattern of stages. Therefore, renewal, evolution, innovation, reform and development particularly are concepts related to change. In the Omani context, the term of reform, a "Tatweer", which means improvement or development in the Arabic translation, is usually used in the MOE when an educational change is made (Al-Alawi, 2015). An alternative viewpoint might suggest that change in education may come in different forms and affect a single institution or a whole country, as claimed by Wedell (2009). It can be simple on a small-scale, such as a change in a school's timetable, or complex on a high-scale, such as introducing a new curriculum with its teaching and learning methods in all schools. It could also be argued that the environment of organization plays a significant role to alter various situations in

different ways. Hence, continuous changes in the education system are realized as normal issues.

Management, as defined by Rondinelli et al. (1990) and Sapre (2002), is the process of organizing and utilizing resources to get things accomplished through other people in a specific environment for achieving certain aims. This means that educational organizations have different activities achieved by people using a particular pattern of management process or management strategy in order to achieve organizational goals. In addition, Bush (2011) emphasizes that there should be a link between educational values, purposes, strategy and day-to-day tasks in order for the management to be successful. Therefore, given the definition of change and management, it can be concluded that management change is a process of transferring either organizations or people from a particular state to a planned future, one using a suitable approach or strategy with the purpose of making positive improvement.

Moreover, Fullan (2007) adds a significant point about educational change. He indicates that it should contain, at minimum, three components: the possible use of new resources, the possible use of new approaches, and the possible change of beliefs. However, this demands strategies to be implemented in order to develop people to cope with organizational change, and hence people need to be committed. Oliver (1996) clarifies this argumentation, "Education is an area of work which demands a high level of personal commitment. It is difficult in many ways, to imagine someone working in education without giving an enormous amount of 'themselves' to the job" (p.4).

Generally speaking, change management empowers educational people, both planners and implementers, to accept and adopt new processes of change in their current fieldwork by using appropriate new strategies, structures or procedures for effective development and improvement. It is necessary that change planners and implementers have the desire, motivation and commitment to make such changes. Additionally, Goodchild and Holly (1989) describe some of the characteristics of those people. It is preferable that they are "more experimental, tolerant of failure, ambitious, self-confident, resourceful, flexible, creative, cooperative, supportive and mutually reinforcing; and encouraging of each other" (p.165). Thus, they need to have good relationships and be cooperative among themselves. Besides, minimising the gap between policy makers and implementers is the most important element of successful change (Fullan, 2007).

3.6.2 The importance of change management in education

Change management is an essential activity in education. It is regarded as one of the most significant and intricate tasks in administration. Reforming the system of education includes many changes. Some changes are unexpected and have unclear results. Dealing with such changes requires the adoption of appropriate management strategies and leadership styles. Change process has to be managed to keep a sense of purpose and direction. Also, those who are involved in implementation of any change have to be managed in order to gain successful outcomes and avoid the appearance of any problems. Additionally, dealing with change management is multi-faceted. It does not involve creating policies and regulations, but it does involve changes in the behaviour of many people (planners and implementers) in an educational organization, either at central level or at school level (Fullan, 1993).

Furthermore, many scholars (Burnes, 2009; Bush, 2011; Fullan, 1993; Morrison, 1998) emphasise the importance of leaders and mangers in managing educational administration. Educational administrators play a significant role in leading and managing change, and create successful achievements in educational development. They should have adequate knowledge about change processes. They also need to learn how to cope with change constraints, and how to reduce them in order to have effective evolution. Additionally, training is pre-requisite for administrators in order to have suitable knowledge, skills and understanding to manage educational organizations in an appropriate manner.

Another two important tasks of educational administrators in change management are pointed out by Morrison (1998). As leaders, directors and supporters, they not only set goals and direct educational change, but they also plan and support change. Thus, education leaders play an important role as facilitators in managing educational change. If this is applied in schools, educational change could be more successful.

Moreover, Fullan (1993) argues that there is a moral purpose in making change in education, which creates a variation in the students' lives, regardless of their background, as well as to aid producing people who are able to live independently and work effectively in increasingly dynamic and complex communities. He specifies four moral purposes in managing change in education: "facilitating critical enculturation, providing access to knowledge, building an effective teacher-student connection and practicing good stewardship" (p.8-9). This could be what the Omani education system lacks in order that the MOE would prepare students to acquire the necessary skills required in higher education and labour market. In contrast, certain principles related to

the national identity of the country should be taken into consideration when introducing any change.

3.6.3 The change process

It has been previously noticed that change is a continuous process to develop an innovation. Fullan (2007) suggests three stages that illustrate the process of making change - initiation, implementation and continuation. All are related to each other and they work continuously. Feedback from each stage is provided from the process to modify decisions made at previous phases. Various results, which are the outcome of change process, are evaluated and can be improved by making further changes until a decision is made. In addition, Fullan (2007) adds that change knowledge should be considered in the change process. Planners and implementers should understand and have insight in to the process of making change and how to practice it successfully. For example, it is very important that those concerned at both levels, central and school, should have knowledge of all the information concerning the change of decision-making decentralization, and acquire the necessary skills in order to manage this reform effectively. However, some processes of making change are lengthy, especially during the implementation stage. They depend on the type of task or programme that needs to be changed. Some of them take more than two to five years, and sometimes even ten years, in case the innovation requires larger-scale efforts. Applying these stages, it could be argued that the implementation of decision-making devolution as an educational change might be expected to take at least two to three years.

Furthermore, three factors should be considered in the initiation of educational change: starting where people are (what are education stakeholders' beliefs and behaviours towards introducing change?), identifying and communicating the need for change and making a long-term commitment (Wedell, 2009). The first factor implies that any change should come from an implementation level, such as the schools where it is practiced, while the second indicates that the reasons for making change should be informed to people at different levels in the education system. Third, the change requires commitment to be implemented, and needs to be supported and funded. All these issues could be considered if the decentralization of decision-making is introduced in Omani private schools.

Moreover, Fullan (2007) adds that the effectiveness of any change process depends on various factors, with the most important factor being obtaining advocacy from the authority. In a centralized system, it is rare that change is initiated without agreement and support from the central power. In the case of devolving decision-making to Omani private school authority, a legislative basis should be established from the MOE to

implement this reform. Readiness is another significant factor to be considered initially by identifying key problems and establishing basic conditions in order to get any action to begin with innovation. While the change is initiated, its process will continue to grow dramatically. In addition, using an effective and appropriate strategy to manage change is the key of the effectiveness of the change process.

In short, managing change is very important in education at all levels locally and nationally in order to have effective outcomes. However, in the researcher's point of view, not all changes are always successful and have positive results, even if their processes are planned well. External and internal factors might have an influence on the success of change. Sufficient and suitable facilities and resources might be not provided to implementers. There might be a shortage of qualified and trained people. Educational personnel can hinder change for specific reasons. For instance, policy makers might regard change as a conflict to the Ministry's policies. Additionally, the change management approach might be unsuitable. In other words, some changes can encounter resistance, particularly if the change is genuinely not worthy. The next part will review the literature of resistance to change.

3.6.4 Resistance to change

Changes in educational organizations are either initiated or forced. Carnall (1999) claims that employees consider these changes in different ways. Some are happy to implement change, whereas others refuse to change. However, Davey, Visscher and Wild (2001) argue that introducing a change, whether it is positive or negative, is always faced with resistance. Hence, resistance to change is considered as the most familiar problem encountered by management in change implementation (Boohene & Williams, 2012). Changes in schools can be opposed by school staff or other stakeholders, such as parents or governmental policy makers. For example, school workers prefer to work with a routine, and know the system well, and are happy about it, rather than changing to an unknown new system which does not deserve their effort, time and attention. The causes of resistance as well as the requirements to overcome this resistance will be discussed in the following sub-sections. Prior to this, some definitions of change resistance will be illustrated.

Definition of change resistance differs from one researcher to another. It is defined as avoidance to change, or disruption or interference with the change implementation process from employees (Folger & Skarlicki, 1999). Oreg (2006) defines resistance to change as a "tri-dimensional (negative) attitude towards change, which includes affective, behavioural, and cognitive components" (p.76). Resistance can be defined as a process of refusal, denial and rejection of change implementation (Agócs, 1997).

Hence, these definitions suggest that individuals are unwilling to change and have negative attitudes or opposition to the implementation of change. Burke (2008) points out that resistance occurs when there is opposition to losing something of value, and from changing from something known to something unknown.

3.6.4.1 Causes of resistance to change

Reasons for resistance differ from one situation to another. Each type of resistance has its own causes. According to Agócs (1997), Barnard and Stoll (2010) and Mullins (2010), change resistance occurs at two levels. The organizational level includes directorates and departments at educational organizations, such as the MOE or schools. The individual level includes employees within these organizations, such as policy makers, principals and teachers. Each level has its own reasons. Employees often oppose change for various reasons, such as habit, fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of losing power or something of value, stress, pressure, misunderstanding the change and its implications, and lack of the skills required after the change. Organizations resist change because of different reasons, including lack of resources, threats to power, financial costs, beliefs and values (Agócs, 1997; Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999; Barnard & Stoll, 2010; Boohene & Williams, 2012; Davey et al., 2001; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979).

Mullins (2010) and Yılmaz and Kılıçoğlu (2013) cite some common reasons for resistance to change. First, employees tend to resist change if it opposes their usual way of behaving. They often respond to situations that they are used to doing regularly. Furthermore, changes that are unfamiliar and unknown to employees are faced with resistance. Workers tend to have a fear or anxiety to implementing changes because they often have inadequate information about the proposed change. Yılmaz and Kılıçoğlu (2013) define this resistance as *blind resistance*. In the beginning school members responded to change in a defensive way. They felt afraid to change as they would be moving from the known to the unknown, which they find strange and unfamiliar until they get used to it. According to the researcher's experience, creating a course for weak students in a private school's timetable before the beginning of the school day was faced with resistance from both the teachers and students. It was difficult to implement this course at first until both the students and teachers became accustomed to the idea. Additionally, there might be some apprehension from the MOE on the success of devolving decision-making to the authority of private schools. It may not be implemented or managed properly. This change may encounter resistance from policy makers. Moreover, interference with need fulfilment is another cause for resistance to change. People resist change if it minimizes their income, professional positions, responsibilities or functions, and social relationships.

In addition, change is resisted if it causes any inconvenience or loss of freedom. Individuals from organizations might refuse to implement a change that decreases their control on functions and leads to a loss of freedom. Changes that lead to a loss of power, decision-making autonomy, prestige and quality of work and other benefits are mostly opposed (Fullan, 2009). In addition, implementing a change that threatens power of an educational organization or influences in controlling decisions, resources or information is often resisted. Based on this argumentation, it could be argued that decision makers in the MOE may resist devolving the entire decision-making authority to private school management because they see this as a threat to the power of their own position, and it could have an influence in controlling poor decisions. They may also feel such change would diminish their power in some areas. Furthermore, delegating some responsibility of specific departments or sections in organizations that have an ideal bureaucracy with a hierarchy of power, in order to achieve the organization's aims, may encounter resistance from a higher authority. This type of resistance is described by Yılmaz and Kılıçoğlu (2013) as political, as it may involve losing a power base, status, position, role or good values. If any decision conflicts with the national, religious or cultural or personal interests of the country, it will encounter resistance from policy makers. According to Agócs (1997), policy makers refuse to implement proposed change if it threats their control. For instance, currently the national curriculum of Islamic Studies is obligatory to be taught to all Omani students enrolled in any private school, and it is prohibited to make any changes to its content. Devolving authority to private schools to make a decision to either not teach this subject or to modify its contents might be met with strong opposition from policy makers for the following reasons. First, the religion of the country is Islam and Omani students as Muslims should be taught Islamic values, obligations and traits. Second, permitting full autonomy to private schools to modify the content of the Islamic Studies curriculum might create conflict between the three Islamic sects that exist in Omani society: Ibadism, Sunnism and Shiaism, which the government would never permit. Therefore, policy makers in the central authority may feel more secure when they have more power to make such decisions. Otherwise, if decision-making is devolved to private school authority regarding such issues, the central authorities might face difficulties in controlling contradictions.

Furthermore, economic implications are regarded as one of the most common causes for change resistance. Workers are likely to refuse change implementation if it reduces their rewards or payments. They would like to maintain the work that provides them with profit. For example, school management might resist a change to lower school fees according to parents' requests. Finally, some changes demand adequate

resources to be implemented. People resist change implementation if there are limited resources in a school organization. Resource allocation, such as employees' time and skills, budget and technical support is required for change implementation (Agócs, 1997).

A study was carried out by Boohene and Williams (2012) to investigate the chief factors that impact employee opposition to organizational change at Oti-Yeboah Complex Limited in Ghana. They conducted questionnaires and face-to-face interviews to gather their data. The findings revealed certain causes that contributed highly to opposition at Oti-Yeboah Complex Limited, including lack of trust and motivation in management, insufficient information, poor communication exchange, and less employee participation and involvement in decision-making. The researchers recommended that "management should encourage employee participation in decision making, build confidence, accept constructive criticism, be transparent and communicate clearly the need for change to employees" (p.135).

To sum up, there are other common causes for resistance to change that are cited in the literature. Habit, interference with demand fulfilment, loss of freedom or inconvenience, economic implications, fear of losing power or control, fear of the unknown, organizational structure and limited resources are a few examples of these causes, which may be relevant in current study's context. If resistance would exist in decentralizing decision-making to Omani private schools, an important question that needs to be asked is: *are there any methods to be overcome*? The answer will be discussed in the next section.

3.6.4.2 Overcoming resistance to change

Several methods of minimizing resistance to change are suggested in the literature. Armenakis and Bedian (1999) and Martin, Jones and Callan (2005) claim that effective management of individuals' psychological transition, such as understanding their behaviour in the organization, is important to implement change successfully. Additionally, Kavanagh and Ashkanasy (2006), and Mullins (2010) add that the effect of change on each employee and the nature of change are necessary to be considered in change management. For example, school employees may react negatively towards change implementation because they have a degree of uncertainty, fear, and frustrated behaviour about change initiatives (Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013). Thus, certain methods are needed to manage change implementation successfully.

Miles (1998) suggests various strategies to implement a change successfully in schools:

- *Effective collaboration amongst school members and stakeholders;*
- *School members should obtain training on skills for change;*
- *Disseminate the innovations which have been adapted during the project;*
- *Identify task forces and consultative relationships;*
- *The school should adopt self-renewal in order to maintain its healthy system through inventing new procedures;*
- *The school should transfer knowledge through knowledge utilisation, and,*
- *There should be networks across schools and districts.* (p.37-64)

Similarly, other researchers (Anderson, 2011; Boohene & Williams, 2012; Duke, 2010; Harvey, 2010; Kotter & Schlesinger, 1979; Mullins, 2010; Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013) advise some specific methods of reducing resistance of change in educational organizations. These methods include *education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support, negotiation and agreement, manipulation and co-optation, explicit and implicit coercion*. Most of these approaches, according to the researcher's experience, could be related to the research context of private schools. These methods can be discussed in the following sections.

- **Education and communication:** This strategy can be used when resistance is caused by insufficient and inaccurate information. Understanding the reasons for change is very important for an organization's staff before implementation; thus, all organization members should be educated about the nature of and the need for change in order to have sufficient information. Additionally, communication between employees themselves or with a higher authority may reduce ambiguity and uncertainty of change. This needs to come from top management to organize face-to-face meetings between employees in order to provide them with explanations and sufficient, valid and reliable information, as well as to exchange ideas and knowledge about change. Displaying reports, publications and presentations are also important to educate individuals about change. Thus, this prepares them to implement change and reduce their fear of unknown issues, such as why change is needed and how it can be achieved. For instance, the nature of and need for decentralizing decision-making authority to private school sites should be explained at both central and local levels. Besides, the domains of decision-making and how to decentralize this authority should be known to all staff members. In fact, the most important thing is that they should understand all the issues concerning decentralization, especially their responsibility and power. Moreover, mutual trust should exist between leaders and organization members, otherwise, change may be resisted. Granting workers the confidence to share their ideas about change

implementation will improve cooperation with their managers; and hence, enhance the performance of the organization (Jones & George, 1998). Ertürk (2008) conducted a study in Turkey to investigate the impact of managerial communication, employee involvement, and supervisor trust on openness to organizational change by using a Trust-Based Approach. The results of his study include minimizing the resistance and speeding up the process of change.

- **Participation and involvement:** This method is appropriate when staff members have important information to contribute to designing the change with change initiators who have inadequate information. Involving employees from different positions to participate in the change process, such as planning, designing and implementation, enriches change agents with ideas and advice that leads to change. Hence, it might reduce the individuals' resistance in the organization. Prior to change implementation, staff, especially resisters, should be motivated by being given a voice to express their opinions on the change with respect and careful consideration from leaders. In this way, resisters can indicate potential difficulties and propose some modifications. This strategy could be implemented in the Omani private school context. If the decision-making process about any change includes participation from different stakeholders, whether administrators, teachers or parents, or with the Ministry, the change might have a positive and effective outcome. Additionally, involving private school stakeholders in the process of making decisions would make them feel more comfortable (Mualuko, Mukasa & Judy, 2009; Santibanez, 2007), especially if their needs and aspirations are taken into consideration. Besides this, allowing school stakeholders a chance to share in the decision-making process will make them to feel more accountable of the results of any decision made (Abebe, 2012; Chen, 2011), and thus, they will be more committed in implementing decisions. Moreover, participation in decision-making requires forming teams, committees, school boards or school directors in private schools, consisting of teaching and non-teaching members, such as school owner/s, principal, vice-principal, teachers and even local community members or stakeholders, such as parents. They meet together to discuss any reforms to make appropriate and effective decisions unanimously. Thus, participation in the process of making a decision about any change from different educators from the Ministry and private schools may ensure effective educational improvements with positive outcomes.

- **Facilitation and support:** This method can be used when an organization's staff face difficulties and problems with change implementation. Organization leaders should listen to their staff about the difficulties they encounter when making changes plus use their ideas to overcome challenges. They should be supportive and facilitative by making the work environment more enjoyable and pleasant. Additionally, this requires leaders to provide training for employees to acquire the necessary skills for change implementation, as well as providing enough materials to help them make the change. It is better to match training with required skills and to implement this continuously. For instance, private school administration or the board of directors should be trained in basic leadership techniques and community organization skills, and receive guidance on how to manage schools effectively according to their responsibility and roles. Thus, training is very important in decision-making decentralization, particularly for those who participate in making decisions, whether it be top school management, such as the owners and principals, or other school stakeholders, such as teachers and parents.

- **Negotiation and agreement:** Cooperation by using negotiation between the leaders of organizations and other members is very important when needing to come to an agreement; and thus, resistance is overcome. In a school setting, in order to incentivise employees to make changes, especially if they will potentially lose something of value due to the change, financial and non-financial incentives and rewards, including salary, bonuses, increasing responsibility and praise, can be offered. In this respect, negotiation about what areas should be decentralized, and the degree of decentralization between decision makers in the MOE and private school administration, is necessary in order to reach a certain agreement of devolving the authority of decision-making to private school level. For example, certain concessions in devolving decision-making authority can be granted to private schools in some areas, such as school fees, versus the MOE who has decision-making powers in some areas.

- **Manipulation and co-optation:** Organization leaders use manipulation to select necessary and accurate information from employees for the purpose of reaching a desired and successful change. Co-optation involves leaders gaining approval of a decision change from resisters by guiding or advising them to a targeted change decision. However, it could be argued that this approach may have negative results if the resisters discover and feel that they are being deceived, which in turn may negatively influence the credibility of the leaders.

- **Explicit and implicit coercion:** This strategy is only utilized by change initiators when the change is seen to be necessary and essential to be implemented. The initiators use their power to force change implementation, including threatening staff if they refuse to make the change. This method is used by higher authorities in the Ministry, or a school's management, in order to make important and necessary changes. For example, the MOE may interfere in dismissing the weaker teachers from private schools. Similarly, by using coercion in this approach, negative effects such as fear, revenge, alienation and frustration might be expressed by individuals, hence, this turns to dissatisfaction and poor performance over educational organizations.

In summary, strategies to overcome resistance to change vary from one educational organization to other. Methods including education and communication, participation and involvement, facilitation and support, and negotiation and agreement might work well in overcoming change resistance in Omani private schools, however, manipulation and co-optation, and explicit and implicit coercion strategies should be considered carefully when using them to overcome change resistance in these schools, as they have negative results. They should only be utilized in critical situations.

3.7 Summary

This chapter has covered the theoretical basis of the study in four sections. The first section compares centralization and decentralization in the educational system with more concentration on decision-making devolution. It seems that there is hegemony in controlling the values, efficiency, and uniformity in centralization, whereas there is preference for freedom, differentiation and responsiveness in decentralization. Also, applying a devolution system in schools grants administers and teachers more freedom in making decisions responsive to local needs. Besides, they have the flexibility and autonomy to make innovations to their schools. However, the central authority always plays some role in education in both cases, decentralization and centralization, depending on the activities that are implemented. This confirms the claim of Zajda (2006) who states that no system should be entirely centralized or decentralized. In the context of Omani private schools, it seems that the current educational system is mixture of centralization and decentralization. Yet, decision-making in general has not devolved to the authority of these schools. The research will find out to what extent this authority is centralized or decentralized. It will also determine to what extent the decision-making authority needs to be devolved to school authority, and in which areas, or it should remain centralized.

The second section describes the most popular strategy in decision-making devolution, SBM, which could be benefited from if decision-making authority is decentralized to Omani private schools. However, if this study discovers that this authority should be devolved to schools, then the following requirements of the SBM might need to be applied. Initially, the devolution of decision-making would need the government to issue a legislative basis with a centrally-determined framework that authorizes schools the autonomy to make certain key decisions. Also, private schools would need to establish a democratic governing body that has authority and responsibility for the school's decision-making, and manages other school affairs. For example, forming school committees or a school board consisting of relevant school stakeholders could be a suitable model in decision-making, but its members would require training in order to fully understand their roles, responsibilities, and accountability. Additionally, accountability is a pre-requisite to ensure positive decision-making and to increase transparency; which in turn, could enhance improvement and reduce corruption in schools.

This chapter has also outlined various international studies on the devolution of decision-making. They indicate the necessity of involving school stakeholders in the decision-making process. Future research in decentralization and decision-making devolution is also recommended, especially within the Omani context because of a scarcity of such studies. Thus, this study will contribute empirical evidence related to different school stakeholders' perspectives regarding the degree of power, and over what areas this power should be devolved to private schools, as well as the people who should have the power to make decisions. Also, this study will contribute to the academic literature base.

The final section explores change management and its importance in education. It also discusses resistance to change, with more focus on its causes and its potential to overcome such resistance. It has been noticed that making changes in an educational organization, such as decision-making devolution, is not any easy task. They might be faced with resistance from different levels. Thus, managing change implementation is very important. Leaders should use appropriate strategies to overcome resistance to change in order to be effective. They should have an insight into the change process, and should be supported and trained on how to practice change and deal with the change constraints. There should be commitment regarding change implementation.

<center>**Chapter Four: Research Methodology**</center>

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses and explains the research method for collecting and analysing the data for this study. It begins by discussing the research design, including the paradigm of the research, the data collection method, the sampling and participants, and the validity and reliability of the data. The issues of ethics, the recorded data, and the role of the researcher will be also identified. Before the end of this chapter, the piloting stage will be presented, and finally the chapter concludes with a discussion of the methodology of data analysis.

4.2 Research Paradigm

Johnson and Christensen (2004) define 'research paradigm', alternatively known as *epistemologies, ontologies or worldview* (Creswell, 2014, p.6), as "a perspective based on a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that are held by a community of researchers" (p.29). It is an approach which leads researchers to think about and conduct research. According to Bryman (2001) the research paradigm sits at the top of the pyramid in the research process and acts as an umbrella for the research practice. Hence, the paradigm works as a guide for researchers on how to practice their research following different techniques or principles, such as choosing methods for data collection, designing sampling, and analysing the data.

In addition, different paradigms can be utilized to outline educational research; including scientific, interpretative, political and ideological (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The interpretive research paradigm attempts to comprehend and interpret the research world through its participants and its subjectivity to understand in-depth the researched topic (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). This was a suitable paradigm to utilize in this study because the researcher wanted to understand, at a deeper level, the participants' perspectives about decision-making authority in the Omani private school context.

Research design, according to Harding (2013), depends on the theory being examined, research questions to be responded to, or research aims to be fulfilled by a study. Accordingly, researchers do not restrict themselves to a certain approach. The paradigm which provides an understanding to answering the research questions is more appropriate to be used. Thus, in light of the sensitivity of this study's topic and its specific research aims and questions, which seek to investigate an in-depth understanding of decision-making authority, a qualitative research design was adopted in this study.

Marshall and Rossman (2006) claim that the qualitative approach allows researchers to understand the deeper perspectives of participants' experiences on a phenomenon in real life situations. In-depth investigation of the phenomenon of decision-making authority can be conducted by exploring the views and beliefs of different private school stakeholders, from both central and local levels. This requires the researcher to get closer to the participants being studied and to personally interact with them in order to explore their perspectives about this phenomenon at a deeper level. In addition, the qualitative approach enables researchers to learn or explore more about a specific topic that little is known about (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Consequently, as no one has attempted to examine decision-making authority in Omani private schooling before, which is unfamiliar to the Omani context, there is a need to delve in-depth into this topic.

Overall, it seems that a qualitative research design is an appropriate approach here because of the nature of the research questions. Besides, there is a need to explore decision-making authority in depth in order to obtain detailed views from different participants studying in their natural setting. Thus, the researcher carried out his work in Oman, in the field, to explore the research problem by collecting data from respondents here. He interpreted the meaning of data related to the topic, aim and questions of the research.

Typically, different methods can be utilized to collect the data of the qualitative research design. These include: case study, administrative documents, meta-analysis, focus group discussion and in-depth interviews (Silverman, 2010). The purpose of this study and its research questions demanded the researcher investigate the area of decision-making authority in order to better understand how to improve this area in private schools. This was carried out by in-depth, face-to-face interviews with participants in order to exchange ideas and views and to gain detailed information. According to Cohen et al. (2011), Oppenheim (2003) and Robson (2002) an interview can be used to collect information for the purposes of the research studied. Arksey and Knight (1999) and Gorden (1987) add that an interview is a suitable method to acquire data regarding people's beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours and knowledge. Therefore, interviews were used to explore different schools stakeholders' perspectives about the issues of improving the functioning of decision-making in Omani private schools. The interview schedule/guide was designed including the questions that were well planned in advance to meet the research aims and cover all key areas of the four questions of the research. This schedule was piloted. Before discussing the type of interview used as the data collection method of this study and other issues related to

the main study, the next section provides detailed information about the stage of piloting interviews.

4.3 The stage of piloting interviews

The piloting stage was conducted at the end of March to the beginning of April 2016, to gain experience of how to conduct interviews, to test the clarity of the schedule, and to provide feedback. Specifically, it targeted:

- Exploring if there were any difficulties in accessing or communicating with the MOE, schools and participants.
- Investigating if there were any obstacles in conducting semi-structured interviews.
- Checking if the respondents understood and were able to answer the interview questions.
- Checking if the data gathered met the research questions.
- Refining the interview questions.

Therefore, confusing, misleading, sensitive or unreliable questions were changed, restated or eliminated in order to obtain reliable and valid data (Gray, 2014; Wellington, 2015).

The semi-structured interview schedule was piloted on 23 respondents, who were different than those being interviewed in the main study, including four officials from the MOE, and 19 administrators and teaching staff from different types of private schools. They were chosen purposefully in a non-random sampling.

Moreover, the researcher found that the stage of piloting was very useful in several ways. It helped him to fine tune his techniques (Wellington, 2015) and to take difficulties that were encountered, and various implications, into consideration when conducting the main study. Some observations and implications regarding the piloting process and the interview schedule include the following:

- Most of the schools were cooperative with the researcher and most of the participants were willing to support the research and were happy to be interviewed. However, it was hard to obtain appointments with a few of the participants, especially teachers, in some schools, such as the global ones, due to preparing their students for exams. This was considered when conducting the main study which was carried out before and after the exam period, plus holidays were avoided. Additionally, it was difficult to conduct interviews with parents as most were busy with working in the morning and with their families in the afternoon. The researcher also encountered similar problems when

conducting the main study. Some appointments with some of the school's members were rearranged, and some with parents were cancelled.

- The setting of the meeting with participants before the interview started was very important, in order to explain the purposes of the study and to build a good rapport with them.

- Some participants preferred not to be audio-recorded, and therefore the researcher took written notes instead. This made it difficult for him to concentrate on the interview process, which could affect the reliability and validity of the data. Thus, both styles of recording were used in the main study. The interviewee chose which style they preferred for the interview recording.

- Most of the interviewees preferred to be interviewed in Arabic rather than English, hence, the interview language was considered as an option in the main study, particularly for those participants who had difficulty using the English language. Using comprehensible language which is relevant to participants creates trust between the interviewer and interviewees. They can speak freely and openly, and provide in-depth data, which in turn enhances the reliability and validity of the data. However, it might impact the data validity when mistranslation or misinterpretation occurs (Keats, 2000).

- The researcher telephoned the schools several times in order to confirm their location and the appointments with participants. He used his own car to travel to and from the schools, which was an additional cost.

- The interview schedule/ guide was not fit for all participants although the data gathered revealed that participants did answer most of the questions. Some questions were restated, merged, or divided into two questions. Thus, the interview schedule was developed to fit all participants and made easier for the researcher to determine the questions of each aim of the research; and hence, it assisted him in analysing the data. For example, some main interview questions which related to the first aims of the research were restated to be easily understood by all of the participants (see Appendix 2).

- The researcher realized that some participants were unfamiliar with the MOE regulations in monitoring private schooling as they were newly employed in the private schools. This impacted their responses, and they could no answer some of the questions. Thus, working experience in Omani private schools plus having enough knowledge about the Ministry's regulations were considered in choosing the research participants for the main study.

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- It was very important to give examples when asking various questions to participants in order to understand them and to be more specific. Hence, using examples according to the position of each participant was considered in asking the interview questions of the main study. In such cases, the researcher was cautious about asking leading questions.

- The researcher tried his best to conduct the interviews in a quiet location, but unfortunately there was some background noise and interruptions in some schools. This was considered when conducting the main study.

- Some respondents went off point and talked about irrelevant issues that were not related to the research topic, when answering some questions. This was considered when carrying out the main study by bringing the interviewees back and keeping the interview on track.

- Transcription of the interviews took up a considerable amount of time. Thus, this was considered when carrying out the analysis of the main data by transcribing the most important and relevant parts of the interview to the research topic, and those sections which most answered the research questions. This way of transcribing proved to be a little faster without influencing on the validity of the data. Additionally, the researcher could have used a dictation machine with foot pedals to facilitate the transcription, using them to play, stop and rewind a recording during typing or writing the transcript (Gibson & Brown, 2009). However, the researcher chose not to use this type of machine when transcribing the main data, finding it easier to play the recorded data on his computer.

In addition, qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collection of this stage, using an inductive approach. The data revealed some preliminary findings (see Appendix 3 for more information about the piloting stage).

The next section discusses the type of interview as the qualitative method of collecting the research's data.

4.4 Types of Interviews

The researcher used face-to-face semi-structured interviews as a method to collect data in the current study because they best fit the aims of the study and the type of subjects, as well as for the following benefits. First, for their flexibility, they allowed the researcher to ask questions in any order. He also had the flexibility to change the questions and form new ones according to the interest of the interviewee, using prompts and probes in order to elicit elaborated data. Additionally, semi-structured

interviews granted both the respondent and the researcher more confidence to gain more clarification of uncomprehensive terms about decision-making authority and related issues, thus preventing misunderstanding. Moreover, pre-prepared open-ended questions of semi-structured interviews made the task easier for the interviewer to conduct the interview, and it was less time consuming (see Appendix 4 for semi-structured interview questions).

In addition to semi-structured interviews, educational researchers categorize interviews into other types, depending on their function. These include: in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews, group interviews, structured interviews, informal conversational interviews, selection interviews, life history interviews and counselling interviews (Bryman, 2015; Cohen et al., 2011; Harding, 2013; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Warwick, 1989; Wellington, 2015). Each type of interview differs from the other according to the purpose, structure and depth of the interview as well as the degree to which the interview is standardized, depending on different respondents and situations. The following table summarizes the comparison between the most common types of interviews that are popular in education and social research, namely, structured interviews, unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews.

Table 7: Types of Interviews

Structured	Unstructured	Semi-structured
May be utilized for large sample	Improper for larger sample	Suitable for small sample
Standardized questions asked in specific order	Open- ended and unstandardized questions asked without set order	Mix of closed and open questions asked in any order
Mostly controlled and guided by interviewer	Interviewer has less control and effect	Control is more on the side of interviewer
Allows no, or less, flexibility to obtain details	Allows more flexibility to gain full details	Permits sufficient flexibility to elicit more detail and clarification
Responses are pre-set, simple and short	Responses are provided with in-depth detail and with more explanation	Responses are obtained with a balanced explanation
Less time consuming	Very time consuming	More time consuming
Easier to analyse	Difficult to analyse	May be difficult to analyse

Source: adapted from (Berg, 2009; Bryman, 2015; Cohen, et al., 2011; Harding, 2013; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Wellington, 2015)

4.4.1 Limitations of interviews

Interviews, like other research methods, have some limitations. First, Bryman (2015), Cohen et al. (2011) and Robson (2002) agree that face-to-face interviews are costly and time-consuming. The researcher took much time to prepare prior to conducting the interview, such as requesting permission from the MOE and the schools, confirming appointments from the participants, and traveling to and from the interviews. Also, the data-processing took around eight months to complete.

In addition, flexibility in the semi-structured interview impacted on gaining different responses from the interviewees for the same questions, which in turn reduced comparability (Cohen et al., 2000). Also, some of the respondents would occasionally deviate from the research topic.

Moreover, Bryman (2015), Burns (2000), Cohen et al. (2011) and Harding (2013) cite other limitations. The first is that there is a chance for bias to occur. Certain responses from participants may be led by interviewer, whether consciously or subconsciously, especially with insider research. One of the most common sources of bias is social desirability. This bias may occur when interviewing participants in their context where participants may not be free to express all of their views candidly, particularly if they are expatriates and work in private schools. According to Fisher (1993) and Krumpal (2013) respondents may provide inaccurate responses to present themselves in a more favourable way, or to present their workplace in a positive position. They think such responses are more acceptable than those that they should make under neutral conditions. Interviewees may hide the reality of some of their actions, attitudes or views from the interviewer because of confidentiality and data protection assurances, particularly if the topic is sensitive. Additionally, if the topic relates to the interviewer's characteristics, such as socio-economic or employment status, social desirability can be observed (Krumpal, 2013). This may lead to deception and it can significantly distort the data obtained from participants, and thus, it influences on the validity of the research. To avoid this bias the interviewer strengthened the relationship between himself and the respondents and avoided asking any sensitive or embarrassing questions in order to build up a level of trust. He also reassured interviewees that his role is as a post graduate student conducting some research, rather than an employee of the MOE, and the data would be confidential and be used only for the purpose of the research.

4.4.2 interviewing process

Prior conducting the interviews, the researcher prepared a lot of things in order to ensure the success of data collection, such as confirming appointments with

participants at a convenient place and time, checking the functioning of recording interviews' tools like audio-recorder, notes or summary sheet and storage devices that have sufficient memory, and printing out interview guides in both languages, Arabic and English.

In the beginning of each interview, the researcher greeted, introduced himself and reminded all the participants about the purpose of the study and his role as a PhD student conducting a critical study rather than an employee in the MOE. They were informed of how long the interview would take and the procedures to be followed. The interviewer reminded them about their informed consent and assured them about the confidentiality of the data provided in order to talk freely and openly. They were also assured about the anonymity of their responses, which are to be used only for the aim of the study. He confirmed them that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Section 4.9 of this chapter provides more details about these ethical considerations.

In addition, the researcher obtained their permission to record the interview in audio-tape, which helped him to focus on the interview and maintain a coherent discussion. It also helped him to keep eye contact with interviewees (Cohen et al., 2011). Additionally, the recordings meant that the researcher could replay the interviews as many times as he felt necessary, especially when analysing the data, and thus, the original data can be checked for accuracy if required (Gorden, 1987). In addition to this, recording measures and improves the reliability of the coding process. However, some respondents refused to be recorded, and therefore interviews were paraphrased using note-taking in these cases. Hence, the accuracy and quality of data in this way increased (Wellington, 2015).

Before proceeding with the interview, all participants were asked if they had any questions. Most of them prefer to have the interview in Arabic. More details about the language of data collection is discussed in Section 4.6 of this chapter. Then, the interview commenced with basic questions about the interviewees' background experience before moving on to the research questions. This helped the researcher to build up a sense of trust and establish a good rapport with interviewees.

During the interviews, the researcher assured that the research questions were covered without duplication or omission of certain important points. He listened carefully to the answers of interview questions, which changed slightly according to the nature of participants involvement in their position. He sought clarification or explanation when necessary. He encouraged the interviewees to talk openly and comment freely through good eye contact, nods of assent and murmurs of agreement.

All participants were interviewed individually for approximately 30 to 40 minutes. After interviewing each interviewee, they were asked if they had any comments to make and were then thanked for their co-operation.

4.5 Reliability and validity of the study

Reliability and validity are crucial issues of any research quality. They are related together although there is no strong evidence about the relevance of reliability in qualitative research. Golafshani (2003) believes that reliability is a result of validity in any research. Accordingly, the reliability of a research can be established by achieving its validity. Reliability, alternatively known as dependability, refers to consistency of participants' responses, especially if another researcher found similar results when testing the same research questions in similar setting (McDougall, 2000). In contrast, validity addresses whether the instruments used in collecting the research data relate or measure the research topic that is being explored. It is equal to trustworthiness, which links to the quality of qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003; McDougall, 2000). According to Cohen et al. (2011), richness, depth, honesty and scope of data achieved from the respondents in the research plus using triangulation of methods in collecting data strengthen the validity of qualitative research.

Reliability and validity in the current study were achieved by adopting the following strategies:

- Deeply discussing about the design of interview schedule with the supervisor.

- Conducting the semi-structured interviews by the researcher himself to ensure that the data collected was appropriate and useful.

- Establishing a good relationship between the researcher and the interviewees by providing all the interviewees an explicit description of the objectives of the research and the procedure to be followed, as well as beginning with basic questions about the interviewees' background information prior asking them the interview questions. This allowed the participants talk openly and freely (Cohen et al., 2011; McDougall, 2000).

- Asking clear, not ambiguous open-ended questions to screened participants at a convenient time and place (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998; McDougall, 2000; Powney & Watts, 1987). This helped to minimise subjectivity and maximise reliability.

- Restating some questions in a slightly different way using probes and prompts to be understood by interviewees according to the nature of their involvement in their position (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bryman, 2015).

- Avoiding using leading and irrelevant questions, especially sensitive questions that could result in the interviewee becoming uncomfortable (ibid).

- Piloting the semi-structured interview schedule on several respondents prior to being conducted, which helped the researcher to gain training (Arksey and Knight, 1999; Harding, 2013).

- Eliciting the research data from different resources by interviewing different informants from central and school levels, which achieved using respondent triangulation.

- Using the appropriate language in interviewing which the participants are comfortable with to express their views and ideas openly and freely (see section 4.6).

- Recording most of interviews using new audio-tape recording tool, and all interviews were transcribed. This aided to minimise subjectivity as much as possible by checking the data for relevance and "accuracy as they are collected" although "consistency and objectivity are hard to achieve" Denscombe, 2003, p.189-190).

- Listening to the recorded interviews several times.

- The analysis and the coding procedure were discussed with the supervisor, as well as with two Omani PhD students, who are familiar with the thematic analysis and the context of the study.

4.6 Language of data collection

Not all participants are English speakers, and therefore, both the Arabic and English languages were utilized in interviewing. There was an option for the interviewees to choose which language they preferred to use. This helped to build a good rapport between the interviewer and the respondents, as well as aiding participants to understand the questions easily and express their views and ideas openly and freely. Thus, fuller expression and more detailed information was obtained (Hsieh, 2011; Welch & Piekkari, 2006). Additionally, Shah (2004) claims that using comprehensible language in interviewing may make data interpretations easier. Hence, this aided the reliability and validity of the data.

On the other hand, using Arabic in collecting the research data has its disadvantages. Arabic data processing is time consuming. It proved difficult for the researcher and took a long time to transcribe the recorded Arabic interviews, and translate many sections into English. Additionally, mistranslation of the data might occur which may lead to inappropriate interpretation, hence, it might influence on the validity of the data. Welch and Piekkari (2006) suggest using an interpreter to conduct and translate the interviews in order to overcome language difficulties. However, this does not prevent translation errors from occurring because bilingual interviewers may have different cultural interpretations. Thus, the researcher does not need a translator or interpreter to understand the use of the language in the cultural context as he is an insider researcher and can use both languages. Additionally, it is better to keep the transcribing of recorded interviews in the same language. Nonetheless, translation is necessary, especially when interpretation is needed in data analysis or discussion.

4.7 Role of the researcher

Before the researcher started his PhD study, he had been working in the DGPS for 12 years, which is responsible for supervising and monitoring Omani private schools. This position allowed him to supervise the performance and the work of these schools. Over his tenure with this directorate, he had a direct involvement and connection with different stakeholders, either in private schools or in the MOE. Thus, from this position, the researcher is already an insider in this research. Being an insider in this research, there are various advantages and disadvantages.

Several advantages of being insider-researcher are related to context knowledge, access, timing, travelling, familiarity and rapport (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Mercer, 2007; Robson, 2011; Roth, Shani, & Leary, 2007; Tierney, 1994). First of all, the researcher has thorough knowledge of the context of the study. He knows the working system of the private schools including policies and regulations. He has knowledge of the real daily problems that private schools encounter. Thus, he is able to uncover hidden difficulties. Second, the researcher was easily granted access to the research setting and had no significant difficulty with approaching the research participants in central and school levels, except for a very few schools. Not only this, but the previous role of the researcher in the MOE also gave him privileged access to elite informants, either in the MOE or in the elite private schools, and thus, the researcher enabled to recruit experienced, knowledgeable and willing participants. Other researchers, especially outsiders, might not have this privileged access, and may face difficulties in research recruitment. Third, there was flexibility with interviewing times in data collection. Fourth, as the researcher lives nearby the research setting, there was no difficulty in travelling, just the normal traffic. Finally, most of interviewees were willing

and comfortable to talk freely and openly as they were familiar with the researcher, especially in the MOE. Thus, these pros facilitated the research process and increased the validity of the research.

On the other hand, the above advantages do not guarantee the success of the research. Being an insider researcher might have negative effects on the research. Robson (2011) argues that it is difficult to maintain objectivity with insider research. Incredibility in collecting data from the participants might occur because of the familiarity of the researcher. For instance, interviewees may not provide critical data or share their experiences and views with the researcher when discussing sensitive and confidential issues, for fear of being judged or losing confidentiality (Shah, 2004). In addition, bias can occur by the researcher due to his prior knowledge. He may unconsciously make incorrect assumptions about the research process, as he may not feel comfortable with probing deeper into the respondents' answers (Shah, 2004; Unluer, 2012). Hence, this might affect the validity of the data.

Consequently, to minimize the negative effects of being an insider researcher, a number of strategies were followed. First, interviewees were informed about the nature and aims of the study, as well as the researcher's role, which is totally different to his original position working at the MOE. He explained his role as a researcher, conducting a critical research, rather than being an employee in the MOE. Moreover, anonymity of interviewees and confidentiality of data were confirmed to all interviewees in order to gain access to sensitive and confidential data. The researcher tried his best to make a balance between participants' perspectives and the researcher's own perspective in the data analysis in order to overcome his bias. Finally, the researcher respected all of the ethical issues, which will be explained later.

4.8 Sampling and Participants

It is unusual as a researcher to be able to deal with an entire population in a study, so sampling is a main aspect of the investigation in order to be able to generalize the outcomes, from sample to population. Educational researchers, such as Gorard (2001), Johnson and Christensen (2004) and Robson (2002) indicate that, "the purpose of sampling is to use a relatively small number of cases to find out about a much larger number" (p.10). Thus, the sample is taken as being representative of the population. On the contrary, Sliverman (2014) argues that it is difficult to generalize the results of qualitative samples because only a few cases can be studied. In line with this, Gray (2014) indicates that qualitative research often works best with small samples of people. Thus, the targeted groups of participants in this study may not necessarily be representative of the population.

The phenomena of a decentralized decision-making authority is the main agenda of this research. Accordingly, informants were selected to participate in the interviews by using purposive (non-probability) sampling; *a sample that is* "built up which enables the researchers to satisfy their specific needs in a project" (Robson, 2011, p.275). Choosing participants purposefully, according to Creswell (2014), will best assist the researcher to comprehend the problem and the questions of the research. Additionally, Cohen, et al. (2011) state that research data is collected from respondents who that particular researcher finds to be of interest. Similarly, Ezzy (2002), Harding (2013) and Johnson and Christensen (2004) point out that certain criteria should be met by participants in purposive sampling in qualitative research, such as knowledge and willingness to provide in-depth information about the topic being explored, thus, participants were chosen according to these criteria.

The main focus of this study is Omani private schools and their administration and stakeholders. However, private schools are monitored centrally by the MOE, hence, the participants of this study are two groups - private school staff and stakeholders (school level), and Ministry officials (central level). The first group includes those participants who represent different managerial and school-practitioner levels, and are responsible, directly or indirectly, for private school management. They are school owners, principals or principal's assistances, who are the key informants of this study. Heads of sections, departments or subjects, and senior teachers or teachers plus parents as stakeholders are also included. Private schools were contacted officially to make arrangements for the data collection. Participants from this group were selected according to their willingness to be interviewed and their work experience in Omani private schools, as well as their familiarity with the Ministry and private school regulations, in order to ensure that they could provide in-depth data about the research topic.

The second group included the MOE's senior officials, who were selected because of their leadership positions in the MOE. They held quite powerful positions, and were involved in the decision-making processes of private schools, as well as being responsible for supervising the work of these schools. This group contains the Undersecretary of Education and Curriculum in the MOE, the Director General of Private Schools, the Deputy Directors General of Private schools, the Director of Supervision and Assessment, the Director of Pre-School Education, the Director of Quality Assurance, the Deputy Director of Licenses, the Educational Expert of Private Schools' Programs and Curriculum, and the Head of Assessment Section. Therefore, meetings with such people were very important because they revealed much relevant

information about the Ministry's future vision with regard to the decentralizing responsibility of decision-making to the Omani private schools.

Furthermore, this study was carried out in private schools in the Muscat governorate, in the Sultanate of Oman. The justifications for selecting Muscat as a place of study are described as follows. First, Muscat is the largest region in Oman, whose capital is located in this area. It is the most densely populated of the Omani regions, thus, it has the largest density of private education provision in Oman (182 private schools), in contrast with other governorates (less than 70 private schools in each) (MOE, 2014c). Additionally, these schools are varied according to type and size. The Muscat governorate has a variety of private schools - Quranic, kindergartens, monolingual, bilingual and global schools, unlike other districts which include only one or two types. Most of the private schools in Muscat have classes from KG level to Grade 12. Besides, most of the global (10 out of 16) and bilingual schools (114 out of 180) in Oman are situated in Muscat (*ibid*). This helped the researcher to choose from a variety of private school types which are not necessarily available in other governorates. Furthermore, the DGPS is located in Muscat, which is the central directorate (office) of the MOE headquarters, responsible for the supervision of all private schools in Oman, and where policy makers (research respondents) are present. Moreover, the researcher himself lives nearby and works in Muscat in the DGPS, which facilitated access to private schools as well as being able to make the necessary arrangements for data collection and allowed more interviews to be undertaken. Consequently, as a large region with a considerable number, and different types, of private schools, as well as limited time scheduled for data collection, Muscat provided a more appropriate environment for conducting the research study, than other Omani regions.

4.9 Ethical consideration

It is very important for any researcher to take into account the ethical obligations before, during, and after conducting a qualitative research study. To conform to the code of ethics, it is worth mentioning here that the researcher applied to the Research Ethics Committee at the University of York, and received their ethical approval for conducting the study.

Moreover, the rights, dignity, needs, values, desires, and anonymity of the participants should be respected by the researcher. Denscombe (2002) points out that the ethical principles are connected to morality issues, which the researcher took into consideration with the participants, who had rights and interests in providing the research data. Harm, consent, deception, privacy and confidentiality of data, as

summarized by Punch and Oancea (2014), are examples of ethical issues. Additionally, identifying the researcher himself to participants is an ethical issue for reasons of honesty and in order to avoid any kind of deception (Gillham, 2005). This section presents these ethical considerations, as follows:

4.9.1 Access and acceptance

The initial step before conducting any research, as pointed out by Cohen et al. (2011), is access and acceptance to the organization. Creswell (2014) asserts that researchers have to gain approval of the gatekeepers in order to access the site of the research. For the current research, the researcher obtained this permission from the Technical Office of Studies and Development at the MOE, after handing over the proposal of study before the pilot was conducted (Appendix 5). Then, by coordinating with this office, he received an official letter from the DGPS to facilitate him with approaching private schools for collecting the research data. Additionally, an official letter with an information page about the study, a consent form, and the researcher's contact details was sent to the private schools in order to make the necessary arrangements for data collection (Appendix 6).

However, only one participant responded. Therefore, the researcher telephoned and visited the schools to explain the aims of the study and to get their permission, and make appointments to conduct the interviews with them. Unfortunately, it was very difficult for the researcher to recruit participants in some schools, especially parents. He struggled to obtain access to some of the schools' principals, despite making more than three appointments with each of them. On the other hand, the researcher's visits to the schools were very helpful, although they cost him both time and money. He was able to inform them about the objectives of the research and then recruit experienced, knowledgeable and willing participants. Finally, he was able to conduct 93 semi-structured interviews from both of the two groups, as follows:

Table 8: Number of participants from the two groups

Name of the group	Number of participants
MOE personnel	10
Private school members and stakeholders	83
Total	**93**

Table 9: Number of schools and participants by school type

School type	Schools	Participants
Quran schools	4	5
Kindergarten schools	7	7
Monolingual schools	8	8
Bilingual schools	42	54
Global schools	8	9
Total	**69**	**83**

Table 10: Number of participants according to their positions in schools

Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	Total
15	45	16	7	**83**

Table 11: Number of participants according to position and school type

School type	Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	Total
Quran schools	1	3	1	0	**5**
Kindergarten schools	2	5	0	0	**7**
Monolingual schools	2	4	2	0	**8**
Bilingual schools	9	26	13	6	**54**
Global schools	1	7	0	1	**9**
Total	**15**	**45**	**16**	**7**	83

Table 12: Number of recorded and hand-written note interviews, either in English or Arabic

Languages	English					Total	Arabic					Total
Participants	O	PR	T	P	MO		O	PR	T	P	MO	
Audiotaped	3	7	5	3	3	**21**	11	28	8	4	6	**57**
Hand-written	0	1	1	0	0	**2**	1	9	2	0	1	**13**

notes											
Total	3	8	6	3	3	**23**	12	37	10	4	7	**70**

- O = Owners
- PR = Principals
- T = Teachers
- P = Parents
- MO =Ministry Officials

The above tables show that the majority of interviewees were principals, mostly recruited from bilingual schools, with a few of the respondents being parents. Additionally, the majority of them were audio-recorded speaking in Arabic, as per their preference. A few of the interviewees did not agree to be audio-recorded, thus field notes were taken as an alternative method of making a record of the interview. The majority of interviewees were interviewed for 30 to 40 minutes. Some were interviewed for more than 40 minutes, or less than 30 minutes.

4.9.2 Informed consent

Informed consent is the second ethical principle after granting the gatekeeper's permission. Participants have the choice to take part or not in the research on a voluntary basis, as well as the choice to withdraw from the study at any stage. Full information, including the purpose of the research, was provided to them (Cohen et al, 2011; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Silverman, 2013). Therefore, written informed consent with the participant information sheet was signed by each participant prior to the interviewing process. Additionally, their permission to be audio-recorded during the interview was obtained. The information sheet with the informed consent was translated in Arabic for interviewees who were non-English speakers (see Appendices 7 and 8 for the Participant Information Sheet with Consent Form in English and Arabic).

4.9.3 Anonymity and confidentiality

Participant anonymity and data confidentiality are other pre-requisites of ethical considerations that researchers should consider. Both terms of confidentiality and anonymity are closely related together. Confidentiality can be defined as keeping the participants' responses hidden from every person except the researcher/s (Saunders, Kitzinger & Kitzinger, 2015). Participants' permission to disclose their data is very necessary. Their responses should not be reported without their agreements. Anonymity is considered as one type of confidentiality. It means disguising the identities of the respondents, so their identities are difficult to be identified by readers (Kaiser, 2009; Saunders et al., 2015; Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008). Assuring

the anonymity of participants and confidentiality of data encourages participants to talk freely (Cohen et al. 2011; Silverman, 2013). Thus, before interview all participants read and signed an informed consent form, which stated that their responses may be presented in research findings without any identification of their identities or causing any harm. The data gathered was only utilized for the purpose of the study, and the researcher used "*pseudonyms*" to identify the participants and schools, in order to protect their privacy (Denscombe, 2002). Also, no participant or school names were revealed, with their identity being kept confidential. Additionally, the interviewees were guaranteed that only the researcher and his supervisor would be aware of their responses. They were also given the guarantee that the data will be treated with complete confidentiality, and will be anonymized and stored by code number in a secured locked room and/or on a password protected computer.

4.10 Data analysis

The method of the research data analysis can be proposed earlier in the research planning stage, prior to when the researcher starts collecting his data (Bryman, 2001; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Wellington, 2015). There are several methods of analysing qualitative data (Cohen et al., 2011; Harding, 2013; Punch & Oancea, 2014; Wellington, 2015). However, there is no single or correct or straightforward qualitative data analysis method to find out the key issues erased from interview transcripts, which are in the "form of large corpus of unstructured textual materials" (Bryman, 2012, p.238). It depends on the purpose and the questions of the research. Additionally, in order to answer the research questions, the researcher has to interpret the raw data in a meaningful way with his personal assessments (Creswell, 2015).

In the current study a general, inductive approach was followed for analysing the data from the semi-structured interviews. Using this approach, the data, after being transcribed, was analysed according to the research questions and aims. The responses to each question from all of the participants were read and reviewed, more than once, in order for the researcher to explore the important and relevant information. Similar responses were grouped together, as well as the different ones, in order to obtain valid data by making a comparison between respondents (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). Therefore, thematic analysis was employed in analysing the research data.

4.10.1 The process of analysing data

Qualitative, thematic analysis was adapted to analyse the data collection of the main study, using an inductive approach. The following sub-sections outline the steps followed to analyse the interview data using thematic analysis.

Organizing and storing the raw data

After gathering the raw data, the researcher organized the interviews into a computerized filing system. Each interview was placed in a separate file. Then, all files were put into five different folders which were labelled systematically, as owners, principals, teachers, parents, and Ministry officials, as well as the school type; Quran schools, Kindergarten schools, Monolingual schools, Bilingual schools and Global schools (Lichtman, 2006). After that, the process of transcribing interviews was applied.

Transcribing

Transcribing interviews, according to Creswell (2014), means "the process of converting audiotape recordings into text data" (p.263). In this process, audio-recorded interviews were transcribed in the same language used to interview the participants. The researcher preferred to transcribe all interviews himself rather than utilizing any software for ethical reasons, as well as to become familiar with the data. This helped him to explore the data and to focus his attention on the details of each interview, as well as thinking about the different themes which could be generated from this process. Walter (2013) referred to this process as an immersion step. However, the transcription process took about four months to complete and was a tedious process, consuming much time (Walter, 2013). Additionally, because of the limited time available and the resources at the disposal of the researcher, he was unfortunately unable to send the transcribed interviews back to participants. However, he paraphrased their responses during the interviews. He tried his best to be as objective and transparent as possible when transcribing the interviews.

All transcripts were categorized and saved in five different folders. For text referencing and citing direct quotes from the interview data, each category of interviewees and school type was given a key name, and each interview in a category was given a particular number. For example, (PR22/BS3) implies that the interview is with a principal, number 22, from a bilingual school number 3. The following table shows the key name of each category.

Table 13: Key names for each category of interviewees and school types

No.	The interviewees' category	Key name	School category	Key name
1	Owners	O	Quran schools	QS
2	Principals	PR	Kindergarten schools	KS
3	Teachers	T	Monolingual schools	MS
4	Parents	P	Bilingual schools	BS
5	Ministry Officials	MO	Global schools	GS

<center>**Source: The author of this study**</center>

Coding, categorizing and identifying themes are the main steps of the thematic analysis, which is the most commonly utilized approach in analysing qualitative research, including interviews (Walter, 2013). Thematic analysis was defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p.79). Central ideas were identified from transcribed interviews and hand-written notes in order to generate themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (p.82). Thus, it is about patterns that have emerged from the data and providing explanations to research questions. In this study, sub-themes were identified inductively from the data interviews which have been gathered specifically for the research. Inductive analysis is "a process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82). Hence, the data were driven from the interviews by using this approach of thematic analysis. To identify the sub-themes of this study, the researcher followed different stages, which are discussed below (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2015; Creswell, 2014; Harding, 2013; Lichtman, 2006).

Reading the transcripts several times

First, each transcription and hand-written note file was read line by line carefully and reviewed more than once. By using this step in an active way, the researcher became familiar with the contents of the data and was able to make initial notes and a list of ideas or thoughts. Not only this, but he also re-listened to the original recording of some interviews during the leisure time when driving or walking in order his memory will assist him "in hearing what is on the tape", as suggested by Gillham (2000, p.71). The coding phase was then implemented.

Coding and labelling

Coding, according to Walter (2013), is "the marking of segments of data with symbols, descriptive words, or category names" (p.234). Because the inductive approach was adopted in analysing the data, empirical codes were used as a type of coding the interviews transcripts and note-taking. They are "derived while reading through the data, as points of importance and commonality are identified" (Harding, 2013, p.82). After in-depth re-reading the transcripts and note-taking, the researcher generated the initial codes from the list of ideas. Important, common and relevant information related to general topics of the research's questions was labelled and coded. Codes can be made in different forms. In the current study, they took the form of different colours, a word, a phrase, a sentence or sentences, a paragraph or lines to show the occurrences of patterns in the data. Additionally, summarizing the data was used to code the responses of participants in order to reduce the amount of data, and which helped the researcher to identify themes. Some of codes, such as a word, a phrase or a summary were made in the margin of interview transcripts. Any code was linked to the research aims and questions (Denscombe, 2014).

Categorizing codes

Using the constant comparison method, a comparison between initial codes was made. The coded data was copied and displayed in the form of tables (Creswell, 2014; Robson, 2011; Silverman, 2010), which made easier for the researcher to make systematic comparisons between responses. The coded data was read several times to look for repetition, similarities and differences in the interviews. Then, they were revised, developed and refined. After looking for connections and commonalities between codes, they were clustered and classified into categories or headings according to the aims and the questions of the research. Some categories were easy to identify, especially the ones that have similar codes and directly related to the research questions, whereas some required the researcher a little more thought to be created.

Forming sub-themes and key themes

After forming the categories, the next process is defining themes. First, the categories were revised and refined. Each category was deeply evaluated to ensure the coded data within categories "should cohere together meaningfully" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.91). This requested the researcher to re-read the coded data extracts. Some of categories were combined and redundancies were removed. Then, the refined categories were examined to identify the relationships between patterns according to the study's aims and the research questions. Finally, sub-themes were defined and

classified into five key themes, which were labelled with concise and punchy names, and which "immediately give the reader a sense of what the theme is about" (ibid, p.93). By the end of this stage, the coding process produced five key themes, and seventeen sub-themes as shown in the figure 3.

These phases of thematic analysis were accomplished manually, using coloured markers to highlight the main ideas, and writing words and phrases in the margin of the page (Appendix 9 shows examples of transcriptions with initial analysis). Additionally, a Word file was also used for each theme consisting of the interviewees' responses which were classified into concepts and categories. The researcher added his comments and any thoughts. Adopting Creswell's (2014), Robson's (2011) and Silverman's (2010) analytical method of *using appropriate tabulation*, this analysis took the form of a table with rows and columns, including the interviewee's key name, their response, and the researcher's comments plus concepts (Appendix 10 shows two examples of tables used in different stages).

In addition, to check the validity of thematic analysis, the researcher asked two of his colleagues, who have experience of the categorization process in thematic analysis, to analyse three transcripts of different participants; a principal, a teacher and an MOE official. Their categorizations were compared to the researcher's analysis. There was a discussion about the difference categorizations. The final themes and sub-themes were then identified (Burnard, 1991).

Furthermore, computer software such as MAXqda, QUALPRO and NVivo could be used to support the analysis of qualitative data in the current study (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2014). For example, the NVivo software package is very supportive for carrying out different tasks related to the management of qualitative data, such as coding, categorizing, searching, browsing, and verifying theoretical concepts. It also permits utilizing memos to record the thoughts and insights as a researcher works through the data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). However, the researcher could not use NVivo (version 11) software despite trying many times with help from an NVivo trainer, as unfortunately, it does not support the Arabic language. Besides, the researcher did not find software alternatives to NVivo in Arabic literature. Thus, he had to analyse the interviews manually.

Figure 2: Data analysis process


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│          Transcribing           │
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│  Reading the transcripts several│
│              times              │
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│       Coding and labelling      │
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│        Categorizing codes       │
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│    Forming sub-themes and key   │
│             themes              │
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│        Writing up Results       │
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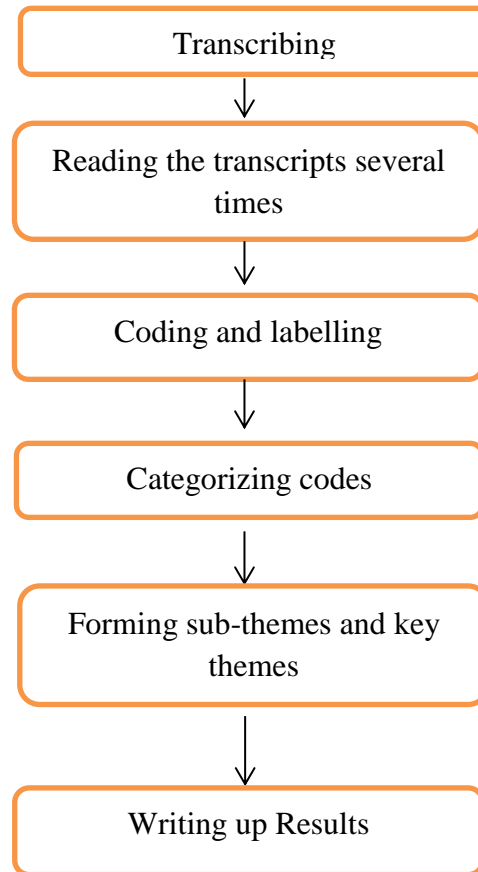
Source: The author of the study

4.11 Summary

The research methodology chapter has covered the different aspects of the research methodology of the study. The research design and aspects relating to the ethics of research have been explained in the different sections. It has also described the type of data needed to be collected from purposeful participants. Details of reliability, validity, data recording and the role of the researcher have been discussed.

Moreover, this chapter has outlined the piloting stage of the research instrument which was very helpful for the researcher to explore the various types of difficulties that he might encounter in accessing or communicating with the MOE, schools and the participants, and in collecting or analysing the data. Hence, he took these difficulties into consideration when carrying out the main study, although some of them were difficult to avoid. In addition, he was able to test the clarity of the questions and make some improvements in the interview schedule (see Appendix 7).

This chapter has concluded with a discussion of the data analysis. The procedure of analysing the data collected from semi-structured interviews was identified using the

inductive approach. Also, the stages of thematic analysis have been discussed. The following chapter presents the findings.

Chapter Five: Findings

5.1 Introduction

Five key themes emerged from the coded data of this research. Each key theme has further sub-themes or sub-headings (see Figure 3 below):

1. The pattern of current decision-making in Omani private schools

2. Consequences of devolving decision-making authority

3. Decision-making domains

4. Decision-making at school level

5. Requirements of the process of devolving decision-making authority

Figure 3: The thematic framework of interviews data

Key themes		Sub-themes
The pattern of current decision-making in Omani private schools	→	Decision-making authority
		Constraints on decision-making
Consequences of devolving decision-making	→	Decision-making devolution
		Positive consequences
		Negative consequences
Decision-making domains	→	School building
		Student affairs
		Staff affairs
		Curriculum and instruction
		General Administrative
Decision-making at the school level	→	Decision-making participants
		Decisions-making style
		Training
Requirements of the process of devolving decision-making	→	Private schools council
		Evaluation and classification
		The criteria of devolving decision-making
		Accountability system

Source: The author of this study

The results of the above themes will be discussed in the following sections.

5.2 The pattern of current decision-making in Omani private schools

This theme is relevant to answering the first question of the study. It focuses on how private school's decisions are currently made, and who has the decision-making

authority or who plays the major role in making decisions in order to explore to which extent this system is centralized or decentralized. It also describes the difficulties that private schools' administrations face in making schools' decisions according to this system. This key theme has two sub-themes; decision-making authority and constraints on decision-making. Each sub-theme is derived from different concepts (Figure 4). The results of these sub-themes will be presented respectively according to responses of the participants.

Figure 4: The pattern of current decision-making in Omani private schools
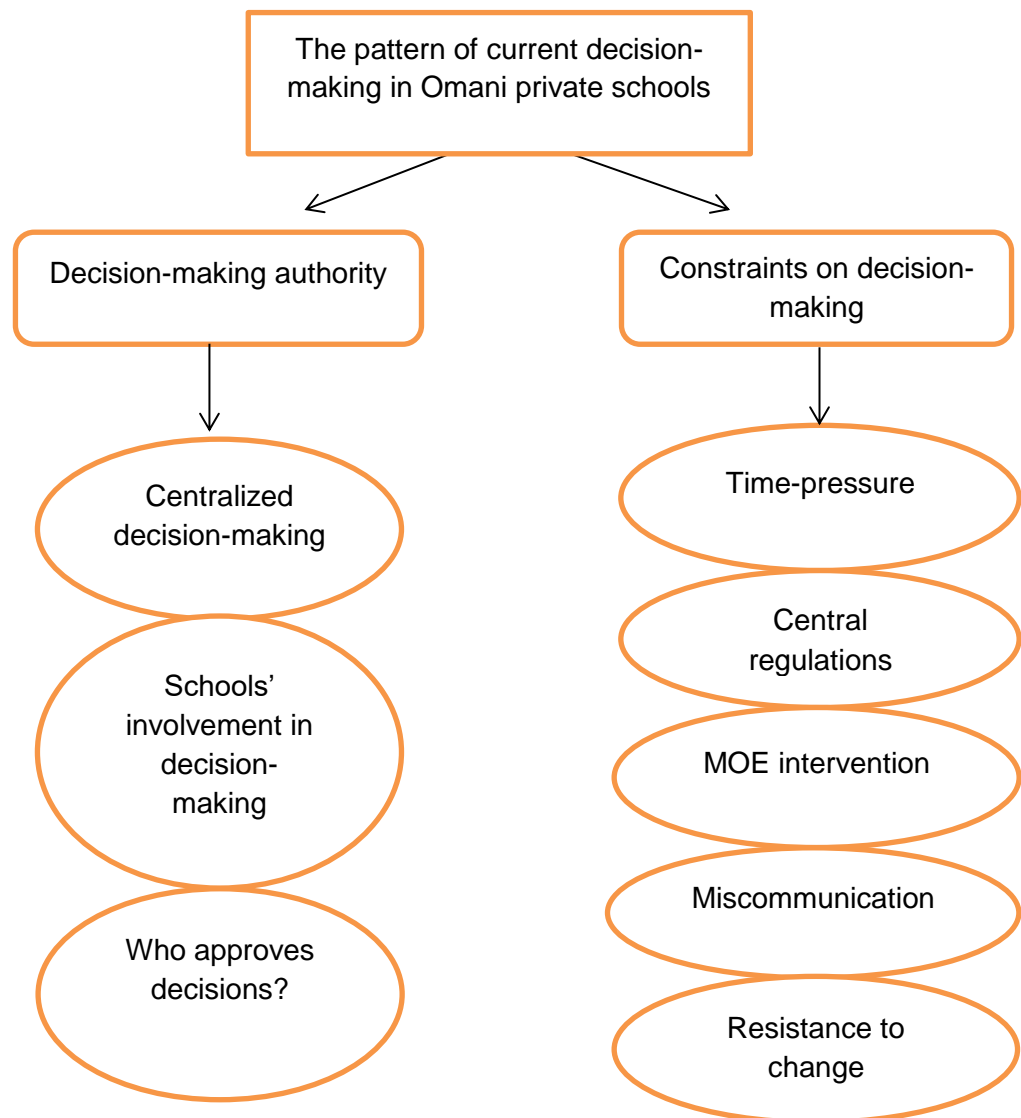
Source: The author of this study

5.2.1 Decision-making authority

This sub-theme presents who has the authority to make the decisions in private schools, the schools' involvement in decision-making process with the MOE, and who the final decision maker is. It has three categorises, which deal respectively with

centralized decision-making, schools' involvement in decision-making, and who approves decision-making.

5.2.1.1 Centralized decision-making

Participants were asked to describe their experiences with the MOE in the decision-making process and what roles private schools had played. The current system of decision-making was described by the majority of interviewees as centralised. The MOE is the top, central authority in making private schools' decisions.

Almost all of the respondents that were interviewed considered the nature of the education system of the MOE in decision-making as highly centralized. The schools' decisions are centrally driven. Private schools play an implementer role in decision-making rather than an active decision-making participator. An owner asserted more than three times in the interview that *90 per cent* of private school decisions are centralized, according to the current regulations or bylaws of the Ministry (O1/GS4). Similarly, the principals confirmed that the MOE has the authority to make private schools' decisions, and some decisions are made from the top officials in the Ministry. One of them stated: *"The current system is 100% centralized and the central destination is bound in a very narrow range. Some decisions of global schools are only made by the Undersecretary of the Ministry, even the DGPS has no authority"* (PR18/GS8).

Moreover, the schools are obliged to apply the centralized decisions, as reported by eleven interviewees, especially principals (PR9/BS19; PR11/KS6; PR32/KS2; PR33/MS4; PR39/GS3), and even some decisions that are not applicable to private schools, otherwise they will be penalized for not responding to the Ministry's regulations (PR6/BS29). A teacher described the current decision-making authority:

> *There are no decentralized decisions. The schools are obliged to implement the centralized decisions, which sometimes make private schools under firm pressure. All instructions are issued from the Ministry and applied by private schools like educational leaflets and the Ministry's bylaws* (T8/BS9).

Despite of a centralized system in decision-making, only three owners and a principal (O10/BS40; O12/KS7; O14/BS37; PR23/GS1) expressed their satisfaction with the current system of decision-making authority. For the efficiency reasons, they preferred for the MOE to have this authority. One of owners argued that the centralized system is important to "*organize and regulate the educational process in the private schools, maintain the quality of education and prevent abuses that may occur in the schools*"

(O10/BS40). Additionally, solely three principals (PR7/QS4; PR10/BS31; PR23/GS1) stated flexibility and freedom are granted to private schools to make some decisions, according to certain criteria specified from the Ministry, such as choosing either a private or the government system for the school calendar and student assessment. They mentioned that some decisions are made according to private school feedback.

Similarly, nearly half of the Ministry officials interviewed agreed that the decision-making process of private schools is still centralized, and that there is an absence in their role in decision-making. A director in the DGPS stated that "*there is no role for private schools in the decision-making process*" in the current system. Decisions are made "*centrally and then circulated to private school administrations to be implemented*" (MO5).

However, most of the Ministry officials that were interviewed reported that some private schools shared in the process of making some decisions. The schools have a certain freedom and flexibility in decision-making, which is similar to some principals and owners' views, but it depends on the decision area, and is according to certain criteria which the school has to adhere to. For instance, schools can recruit their own school staff and students (MO7).

All in all, the authority of decision-making of private schools is still controlled by the MOE, although some flexibility is granted to schools in limited areas.

In addition, a few respondents explained why decision-making is centralized. One of the reasons, as noted by a school owner, is that the educational system is affected by the centralized governing system in the country, as it is a part of an integrated system of the state, which includes different sectors of political, economic, security and religious aspects, which cannot be isolated from each other (O1/GS4). Similarly, a Ministry official agreed with the owner's perspectives about the same reason; "*Oman, as a political system, has a centralized system; and this is reflected in the MOE which has a centralized system*" (MO3). Thus, it is expected that decisions are issued at central level because private schools are a part of the education system, which is supervised by the MOE.

Moreover, compared to various developed countries, one of the owners believed that the educational system is centralized because Oman is still a developing country; and hence, its educational system is still relatively new (O12/KS7).

Further reasons were indicated by one of the school principals who explained that schools have inadequate experienced decision makers, and the MOE is keen to provide suitable education to Omani students, rather than allow schools to implement

American, Canadian, British or Australian systems without recognizing what may be best for their own students (PR34/BS7).

In addition, one of the senior teachers explained that decision-making is centralized because the government is responsible of providing quality education to its citizens, which is quite similar to the principal's opinion. If a school's functions are handed over to the private sector, then the government will be compelled to put checks and balances in place, to ensure that they are closely regulated and monitored (T13/BS14). Accordingly, the government can make sure that students are provided with all the necessary educational requirements because the main aim of most private schools is profit-making. For example, some private schools' owners might minimize their expenses in providing essential school facilities in order to make more profit, which in turn may reduce the quality of education.

Furthermore, involvement problems which might occur in decision-making devolution are another concern at central level. The Ministry aims to prevent chaotic situations from occurring. One of the owners stated:

> *I think the Ministry lacks confidence in some of administrators of private schools for the occurrence of excesses and problems of some private schools. Thus, the Ministry controls the decisions in all respects and does not want to open the door to certain people and the rest not, so as not to be problematic with the other* (O14/BS37).

5.2.1.2 School involvement in decision-making

The results of the research data indicate that there is a lack of school staff involvement in the decision-making process. This is not a surprising result of the centralized control in decision-making authority.

Almost all of the owners (14 out of 15), and many of the principals (21 out of 45) and teachers (9 out of 16) interviewed agreed that private schools are not involved in the decision-making process. The MOE sets all private school regulations without their participation. One of the principals claimed:

> *There is no dialogue between us and the Ministry at all. There is no participation and no use of schools in the decision-making process. There are experiences in schools. The Ministry should send a questionnaire or arrange a meeting between principals to discuss school issues before making any decision* (PR32/KS2).

Most key decisions are made by the MOE without the involvement of schools. For example, new fees have been approved recently as a school registration license centrally, without consultation with the private schools. Fees were raised five times, but instead, it was felt that these schools should be exempt from such fees and should be supported (O8/BS36).

In addition, none of the parents interviewed had been involved directly with the Ministry in terms of making private schools' decisions. Their participation is just limited to some issues at school level. One of the parents interviewed claimed: *"As a parent they have never asked me what I want from the MOE and what they can provide for me"* (P3/GS4).

However, nine participants (O5/MS1; T4/BS23; PR24/BS20; PR27/BS34; PR28/BS13) thought that certain larger schools, such as global schools*,* are consulted when some decisions are being made. For instance, teachers from particular schools are involved in the discussion of some issues concerning the curriculum of English subjects: Math, Science and English, such as curriculum design, and planning subject matter (T3/BS28). Additionally, sometimes the Ministry sends questionnaires in order to gain the schools' opinions. The Ministry also holds various meetings with school staff, yet, these meetings are not adequate*,* with often only one being held per year*,* and sometimes they are not entirely purposeful. Additionally, the Ministry does not always take into consideration the teachers' and principals' ideas. During some of these meetings the school staff receive criticism and blame for areas that may be weak, as noted by one of the school owners (O8/BS36). Thus, most schools' staff refuse to attend such meetings. A principal argued: *"We sent our comments about the kindergarten curriculum, but nothing has been done according to what we sent"* (PR38/KS3). Another principal talked about the meetings' negative outcomes:

> *I cannot see any real change of the outcomes of these meetings. They just go there and negotiate some points and I cannot see any change in the decision-making. Still it is being done the same way that it has been done over past years* (PR14/BS11).

Furthermore, two owners explained why the MOE qualifies private schools involvement in decision-making. One of them believed that many private schools do not have a strong policy, or have experienced and highly qualified people in the decision-making process, and they are of poor quality (O4/KS5). The second owner claimed that the culture or the system of the country limits the decision-making involvement (O14/BS37).

In contrast to the school members' views, all of the Ministry officials interviewed, except for two, pointed out that some schools are involved in some of their decisions. It depends on the type of decision and its relation to the school. For example, the Ministry consults the owners or principals of bilingual schools if the issue is related to such schools (MO4). Additionally, the Ministry forms teams comprising of the best teachers from some of the private schools in order to benefit from their expertise in setting the educational outcomes, and defining the curriculum syllabus of English subjects that are to be implemented in a bilingual program in the relevant private schools (MO9).

General speaking, it seems that particular schools are involved in the decision-making process, but the involvement is limited to certain issues. The next section will clarify who has the authority to approve decisions.

5.2.1.3 Who approves decisions

The findings from the research data indicate that the MOE approves private schools' decisions and modifies the suggestions to any decision recommended by these schools. All of the interviewees responded that private schools are required to gain final approval for their decisions before implementation, for any issue, whether small or big (O1/GS4; T7/BS26). Hence, the MOE is the final decision maker for most schools' decisions, including staff appointments, curriculum, activities, students affairs, setting exams, location of the school building, and even for the simplest issues, such as organising a school trip. One of the principals reported:

> *When we want to change the school uniform for the next year, we have to come up with a proposal and a cost, and send it to the Ministry. If they will not approve it, we cannot go ahead. We have been trying for one and a half years now* (PR22/GS2).

However, only four participants (O10/BS40; T9/BS9; P6/BS4; PR19/KS4) argued that it is positive and important to obtain the Ministry's approval of private schools' decisions, so that good decisions are made, and there will be no abuse of the system that could potentially harm the educational process (PR19/KS4). A parent commented about the necessity of central approval for some of the school trips: *"We have certain traditions in making relations between boys and girls that should not be exceeded. For example, various trips and camping, as an activity, are not suitable for mixed students. They should be approved and supervised"* (P6/BS4). Similarly, a senior teacher explained about the importance of approving the curriculum from the Ministry:

> *There could be a certain syllabus which does not fit our customs and traditions in Oman. So there should be a certain body who is responsible*

for saying that this does not work, because it does not match our customs, our conventions and our traditions. So we should consult the MOE. We cannot make our decisions so widely independent (T9/BS9).

Like other participants, most of the Ministry officials (6 out of 10) asserted that private schools have to refer to the MOE to obtain the approval of their decisions, especially the main educational and administrative decisions, including the school calendar, student assessment system, and other students' affairs, such as the admission age. One of the Ministry's directors described the procedure for gaining approval:

For example, to get approval of an educational program or any activity, the school has to send the Ministry details of the program, targeted students, implementers, implementation time and whether there is a fee or not. Then, the concerned specialists in the Ministry study the school's request and respond positively or negatively, and sometimes adjustments are required to the request if necessary in case of approval. (MO5)

On the contrary, one officer claimed that schools do not need to gain the approval of all school's issues, only those that directly affect the students' learning process, and the amount of information that the students have, such as book choice (MO4).

Furthermore, updating the database of the private schools, making sure that everything is fine and nothing is misused are some of the Ministry officials' reasons for the necessity of gaining the Ministry's approval of private school decisions (MO2; MO6; MO8). Besides, making sure that the schools do not teach anything that contradicts the Islamic customs and values, is another reason for obtaining the Ministry's approval of the school curriculum (MO9). When one of the Ministry officials was asked who gives the final approval of a private school's decisions, she answered:

The Ministry, because we have to keep records on the database of what is happening and have a clear picture. There are also schools that deal with international agencies to acquire accreditation and if we do not guide the schools, what happens sometimes, they are misguided. (MO5)

In conclusion, the decision-making authority remains at central level, although private schools do have some flexibility in making some of the decisions. They have to refer to the MOE in order to gain final approval of most school issues. Additionally, Omani private schools have limited autonomy in decision-making. They are granted the authority to make minor routine decisions, but the most significant decisions are made by the MOE. This is due to the bureaucratic, political governing system of the country,

which is in one person's hand - Sultan Qaboos, and which is acted on in all governmental institutions, including the MOE.

5.2.2 Constraints on decision-making

The participants from the private schools were asked to describe whether or not they faced any difficulties in making the schools' decisions. None of them answered on the contrary. They all responded that they had faced challenges, which hindered a lot of the school work, as a result of centralized authority in decision-making exercised by the MOE. They cited many constraints. The most frequent constraints were: time-pressures, central regulations, MOE intervention, insufficient communication and resistance to change. These constraints will be illustrated respectively under the following sub-headings.

5.2.2.1 Time-pressures

Time-pressures are recognised by the majority of participants as one of the main decision-making constrains. The MOE delays approving most decisions which take a lot of time to be approved (O3/BS31). Not only this, but sometimes the central authority does not respond at all to the schools' requests, as noted by some of the principals and owners. Many of the private schools do not receive a response, whether approved or rejected, even if they contact the Ministry by telephone on more than one occasion (PR32/KS2).

Most of the interviewees (35) from school level including parents reported that the MOE delays approving specific school matters, such as those relating to teacher appointments, school buildings, activities, tuition fees, curriculum, and student discipline. The majority of the bilingual and global private schools take an average of five months to gain central approval for their teachers (PR25/GS6). Additionally, with regards to delaying approving decisions relating to activities, a school owner indicated that the school was granted the MOE's approval for its sports day a week after it was due to take place (O2/BS32). Moreover, four owners (O5/MS1; O7/BS41; O9/BS3; O13/BS30) complained that they faced difficulties of approving their school tuition fees and renewing their school licence. The request for tuition fees sometimes takes more than a year. Similarly, the MOE takes at least six months to renew the schools' license (O13/BS30). Furthermore, there is usually a delay from the Ministry to approve the curriculum chosen by schools. The schools occasionally have to wait for a long period of time in order to have the Ministry approve its choice of textbooks (PR5/MS3). Likewise, some decisions relating to student discipline are delayed. A principal commented:

I expelled two boys and it took me more than a year to get the Ministry to approve getting them out. In that time I lost many good students. They were scared because those two boys were causing so many problems. (PR22/GS2)

There are several reasons for delaying school decision approval, as explained by some participants. One of these is concerned with the Ministry's employees. They do not work collectively, but work individually (O2/BS32). Additionally, there are insufficient staff in the Ministry to deal with schools' requests, and to respond in time. The lack of adequate employees in the Ministry causes pressure in the Ministry's work. Three owners and a principals agreed on this point (O1/GS4; O8/BS36; O13/BS30; PR3/QS1).

Furthermore, any changes in the appointment regulations (PR25/GS6) and the need to be *accredited by a higher authority* in the MOE, such as from the Ministry's Undersecretary (O13/BS30; PR9/BS19) are other causes for delay in approving decisions. This process takes time. It takes a full cycle from the schools to the concerned departments in the DGPS, which in turn addresses some of the school issues to be approved by a senior, higher authority.

Delayed decisions have negative effects, as claimed by several respondents. First, delayed decisions from the Ministry means other processes will be suspended, either inside or outside of the school, especially the delaying of school staff arrival; which in turn means the educational process could be affected. For example, the delay in approving the school license may result in not obtaining visas for teachers who the school wish to appoint; and hence, irregularities in the procedure and fines incurred may be recorded (PR9/BS19). Additionally, detaining other school issues, such as the implementation of an international program can be quite costly and a strain on the school's budget (PR27/BS34).

Furthermore, wasting time was cited by an owner of bilingual school in other situations, including school visits made by some of the Ministry's employees, who are seen to waste the schools' time with unimportant matters, such as checking the date of birth of each student by going through each individual student file (O13/BS30).

Similarly, time delays was confirmed by eight of the Ministry officials that were interviewed. They did not ignore this and were aware that this difficulty is encountered by the schools, yet they explained the reasons. Two of them (MO1; MO4) mentioned that the multiplicity of authority that supervises private schools, either in the MOE or other ministries, delays the approval of some schools' issues. Accordingly, the Ministry

cannot give them direct approval because they have to wait for official responses from different government sectors. A department director commented: *"There is no one station to submit private schools' requests, which delays the approval, as well as the lack of specific dates for the submission of their requests"* (MO1).

On the other hand, another Ministry official believed that some private schools cause the delay of some decisions, such as staff appointments, because they do not comply with the Ministry's regulations or specified dates in sending their requests; *"If there is commitment of time and selecting good teachers according to the Ministry's regulations from the schools, I would not imagine there would be difficulties"* (MO2).

Moreover, two Ministry's officials (MO2; MO8) agreed with three owners and a principals (O1/GS4; O8/BS36; O13/BS30; PR3/QS1) regarding the lack of the number of the Ministry's staff who handle private school issues. An employee in the Ministry reported: *"It is difficult to review all the proposed textbooks from private schools because there are not enough specialists"* (MO6). Additionally, the lack of English language knowledge amongst the Ministry's staff is another main reason for the delay (MO8).

5.2.2.2 Central regulations

Central regulations were regarded by most of the interviewees as a barrier in decision-making. Regulations that concern school staff appointments, student affairs and curriculum management are the most frequent as mentioned by the majority of participants. They can be classified into two categories; inflexibility and outdated bylaws.

Inflexibility regulations

Inflexibility is one of the challenges that private schools face in the decision-making process. The majority of the respondents interviewed from the schools reported that they are not granted any flexibility in making decisions of some school issues or implementing the central regulations. Many issues are citied, but the most repeated are appointing school staff, the curriculum and teaching plans.

Omani private schools struggle to recruit teachers, according to the Ministry's regulations. Most of owners, principals and teachers complained about the strict and complicated regulations involved in appointing school staff, especially teachers. Owners spend much time and effort, as well as money from their budgets to travel abroad to recruit their teaching staff; however, some of them are rejected for unimportant conditions (O1/GS4; PR10/BS31). The respondents thought that the Ministry's terms of appointing teachers are strict and inflexible, such as years of

experience and qualifications, which then makes it difficult for the school to recruit a teacher accordingly (PR28/BS13; PR19/KS4; PR34/BS7). For example, the schools cannot appoint a teacher with only a diploma even if they are experienced in teaching. The Ministry requires schools to appoint their teachers with at least a bachelor degree. Thus, they feel that this might affect the teachers' stability and student achievement (T1/QS1; O7/BS41). A school principal commented about the Ministry's appointment requirements: *"The person's certificate is only a paper, but it does not mean he or she can teach. The Ministry's people look at the certificate paper and make a decision accordingly"* (PR23/GS1).

In addition, one of the most difficult terms in hiring teachers, as cited by the majority of owners and principals, is the IELTS requirement. The Ministry does not allow schools to appoint teachers who teach English as a subject, if they do not have at least a score of '6.0' in their IELTS, even though their teaching is fine, and their children are learning well and gaining very good marks (O3/BS31; PR14/BS11; PR31/BS6; PR41/BS12). It is very difficult for schools to find teachers who have a score of at least 6.0 in their IELTS in the Sultanate (O6/BS2; O8/BS36). They spend a lot of time recruiting teachers from outside the country, which delays their appointments.

Moreover, it is hard for small schools to provide specialized teachers for non-core subjects, such as music, art and sport, because these subjects have less periods in the timetable than other core subjects, as claimed by three principals (PR15/MS5; PR21/GS7; PR17/BS24). They proposed that the authority should allow them to exchange a teacher for each subject between three schools. A principal suggested to overcome this difficulty:

> *Why should it not be allowed to exchange teachers between three schools for teaching these subjects with approval from the MOE and the Ministry of Manpower (MOMP)? Each school could appoint a teacher for a certain subject on its sponsorship. They exchange the three teachers between them, so all would benefit, especially students.* (PR17/BS24)

Furthermore, private schools have no flexibility in the appointing procedures. Attestation of teachers' papers, such as their certificates for their qualification and confirmation of their previous experience is one of the Ministry's demands which hinders the appointment process. It is difficult for some teachers, who are outside of the country, to travel to other areas to do the testation (O8/BS36). Additionally, according to the MOE's regulations, other procedures that the schools have to follow is gaining approval for their appointments from other governmental institutions, such as the MOMP, and the Royal Oman Police (ROP) and others (O14/BS37; PR4/BS33).

Such procedures are identified by four owners and two principals (O6/BS2; O8/BS36; O10/BS40; O14/BS37; PR4/BS33; PR21/GS7) as an obstacle when recruiting teachers. A principal reported: *"Linking appointment procedures to more than one authority rather than the MOE is difficult for us to finish the appointment, which could be delayed, and thus more students would be affected"* (PR21/GS7). They suggested that there should be *one station* to complete these procedures (O10/BS40).

Consequently, two participants (O8/BS36; PR14/BS11) mentioned that they lost good teachers as a result of inflexibility in regulations and complicated procedures in appointing school staff. Also, the strict regulations cost a lot of money, time and effort (PR10/BS31; PR21/GS7; PR28/BS13; PR44/BS21).

Moreover, inflexibility in choosing the curriculum was mentioned by 13 interviewees. The schools have limited textbooks chosen from the Ministry's suggested list of books that match students' needs. Thus, they need more flexibility in choosing their curriculum in order to provide local needs with the demands of education quality (O13/BS30; T2/BS10; T12/BS27; T14/BS15; P4/BS1; PR8/BS1)*.*

Outdated bylaws

Bylaws are another issue that hinder private schools in decision making. The private schools bylaw is old (since 2006) and has not, as yet, been updated. The current school bylaw contains inappropriate items which are difficult to apply to some types of schools. It is regarded as a policy which contain regulations to organize the work of these schools, but does not contain specific guidelines for their current work. The bylaw does not solve the schools' more complex problems (O3/BS31; O10/BS40**;** O14/BS37; O15/MS7; T3/BS28; PR18/GS8; PR21/GS7). Thus, there is a gap between the current Ministry's school bylaw, and the educational environment of the different types of private schools, which restricts them in making suitable decisions. Some private schools have avoided to implement the Ministry's regulations as a result of the ambiguity of this bylaw.

Similarly, two teachers (T6/BS18; T16/BS19) have complained about the student affairs bylaw, which does not help them in controlling abnormal students, as it strictly prohibits students' punishment. They believed that it causes some students to be indifferent, and have a lack of interest and desire to study, as well as giving them an excuse for a lack of respect for their teachers and colleagues, using verbal abuse and not listening to them. Additionally, another teacher (T10/MS2) thought such students were not concerned about their discipline problems because they believe that they are

enrolled in the private school in order to succeed because they have paid for their study.

Contradictory and inappropriate decisions

A few participants (4) from private schools indicated that some central decisions contradict each other, especially those decisions concerning the curriculum, holidays and appointing teachers. For example, the Ministry allows the use of the drama playwright Shakespeare's books, which include the romance of *Romeo and Juliet* in Grades 10 and 11. On the other hand, it instructs schools not to educate children in romance works, because they are *haram* (forbidden) according to the Islamic religion (O2/BS32). This causes confusion to schools as to whether to teach such books to students or not.

In addition, a contradiction in the regulations of appointing school staff between the MOE and the MOMP was also mentioned by three principals (PR4/BS33; PR17/BS24; PR39/GS3) and two owners (O10/BS40; O14/BS37). The MOMP requests that private schools appoint a specific percentage of Omani teachers, both male and female in the kindergarten and first cycle levels (Grades 1-4)*,* in order to grant them approval for the rest of the expatriate teachers. However, it is very rare to find an Omani teacher, according to the MOE's terms, who wants to work in a private school (O10/BS40; O14/BS37; PR17/BS24; PR39/GS3).

Moreover, not all central decisions are appropriate for implementing in all types and sizes of schools. Some of them are general decisions which are applied to private and government schools. The requirements of each type differ. 16 participants from private schools, especially teachers and principals stated that some of the Ministry's decisions are circulated to all schools without consideration of the school size or the possibilities available within this school (O13/BS30; T3/BS28**;** T8/BS9; PR11/KS6; PR21/GS7). An example was given by a principal, below:

> *The Ministry requires us to provide records under specific names, some of*
> *which do not apply to us as kindergartens, even if the content of a record*
> *is re-ordered in another record available at the school* (PR11/KS6).

Only four Ministry people (MO1; MO2; MO8; MO10) interviewed agreed with the other respondents regarding the strict and complicated regulations of appointing teachers, contradictory regulations and outdated bylaws. For example, the Ministry does not approve teachers who teach subjects in English, such as Maths, the Sciences, IT and English unless they have scored at least 6.0 in their IELTS tests (MO2). Additionally, a Ministry employee suggested that the Education and Labor bylaw should be issued by

the Council of Education to overcome the difficulty of approving appointments from different ministries, such as the MOE and the MOMP (MO10). Regarding the bylaws, MO1 and MO2 stated that the Ministry's bylaws are outdated and do not fit the current education system. They are often unclear and need to be updated.

However, MO4 and MO6 argued that the Ministry is keen to make suitable regulations for all types and size of private school. One of them said: *"We have some standards that should be implemented for all kinds of schools because we want all schools to provide good education"* (MO4).

5.2.2.3 MOE Intervention

Intervention from the MOE officials was considered to be a decision-making obstacles by most of the owners, principals and teachers. They claimed that some officials from the Ministry interfered in school issues according to their temperament (O1/GS4), including many schools' financial matters, such as school fees, financial expenses, salaries and allowances which are not part of the Ministry's role, as they are regulated by the Ministry of Commerce, Chamber of Commerce and the MOMP (O8/BS36).

In addition, the three most frequent school issues that the MOE intervenes in, as reported by many respondents, are the decisions of students whose fees are not paid, school buildings and the curriculum. Regarding the unpaid fees of some students, four owners (O2/BS32; O3/BS31; O6/BS2; O9/BS3) indicated that the central level should not interfere in such decisions because they are internal financial matters between the schools and the parents of the student, who could raise such a case in court if they if they are not satisfied that fees have not been paid accordingly.

Concerning central intervention in school building matters, participants mentioned that the Ministry officials sometimes request a change to the site and the size of a school laboratory, for example, or add new rooms to be used as a library, for instance, even though the building was established according to an approved plan originally (O7/BS41; O8/BS36; PR8/BS1; PR14/BS11).

In terms of Ministry intervention in the school curriculum, only three respondents (O8/BS36; PR22/GS2; PR34/BS7) mentioned that supervisors intervene in the teaching of the bilingual and international curriculum. They are inexperienced in teaching the international curriculum and request the schools apply the Arabic government syllabus which is appropriate for monolingual schools.

Three teachers (T1/QS1; T4/BS23; T6/BS18) claimed that intervention from the Ministry has negative effects. They believe that the intervention of the Ministry's supervisors in the role of the teacher may reduce the process of development and

creativity in the educational process. They indicated that the supervisors have asked them to use traditional teaching methods, and have imposed the use of the Ministry's curriculum plan. Thus, they need flexibility in teaching their lessons.

However, only one of the teachers considered the interference of the Ministry supervisors to be positive for teachers, stating that they guide them to work in a 'correct way' (T7/BS26). Similarly, three MOE officials (MO4; MO5; MO7) interviewed saw that the indirect intervention by the Ministry in the work of the schools as necessary to ensure that students receive a good education, and according to the goals of the country.

5.2.2.4 Miscommunication

Miscommunication between people in private schools and the MOE was seen as a constraint on making private school decisions. Numerous principals, teachers and owners revealed that they need clear links to communicate with the relevant people at the Ministry, who could help them with making their decisions. They believed that the schools are not informed with the latest updating of issues in a timely manner. Additionally, there is no clear guideline expressing who to approach at the Ministry for various school issues, whether it be curriculum, examination or student registration issues (O3/BS31; T3/BS28; PR32/KS2). A principal (PR25/GS6) claimed that they had never had a discussion with any official from the Ministry about school objectives, and their roles and responsibilities towards Omani students.

The reasons for miscommunication, as perceived by two respondents, could be cultural, as most of private school principals came from different cultures outside of the country, and have different educational backgrounds (PR25/GS6). It could also be a matter of linguistics, as many people in the Ministry are non-English speakers (O2/BS32). For example, the Ministry's staff, who do not have any knowledge of the English language face difficulties understanding the meaning of English sentences and the purpose of specialization in qualifications when checking teachers' appointment papers (PR21/GS7). Similarly, two interviewees (O2/BS32; PR22/GS2) mentioned that all the Ministry's circulars, correspondence and meetings are in Arabic, which is difficult for some principals and teachers to communicate with and understand, as they are English speakers.

5.2.2.5 Resistance to change

Resistance to change from higher authorities and the local community was cited by a teacher (T3/BS28) and five school principals (PR13/BS2; PR14/BS11; PR25/GS6; PR40/GS5; PR44/BS21) as a challenge in making decisions. Centrally, the Ministry does not want to change the procedures and instructions of the education reform,

although they have willingness to change and improve the education system. Schools find it difficult to persuade the Ministry to improve the system (PR40/GS5). A principal reported that he was involved with other private schools principals in presenting a paper to the MOE about making changes in the education system, including decision-making. He commented:

> *We made a number of recommendations and we sent a working copy. But two years later, none of these things have been followed-up. No one has come back to us as a group and said, 'you know we need to have this and we need to have that'* (PR25/GS6).

Locally, some parents resist some changes in the education system, especially when introducing international programs (PR13/BS2). For instance, a teacher (T3/BS28) reported some parents' refusal to sit their children for the Cambridge primary program's exams because they would lose marks.

Change is resisted because of religious reasons as mentioned by only two respondents in this study (T3/BS28; PR40/GS5). For example, in some schools, some of the students declined learning music and sport because of religious reasons (T3/BS28). Similarly, one of the principals confirmed that the Ministry prevented the private schools from having a Christmas party or putting up Christmas decorations because Oman is a Muslim country (PR40/GS5).

To sum up, it can be concluded that the current MOE system is purely centralized, and is affected by the country's bureaucratic, political governing system, as well as the Islamic culture. The majority of interviewees confirmed that the Ministry has the ultimate authority in making private school decisions. Some private schools are rarely involved in the decision-making process, apart from some limited issues. Also, all private school matters, especially those that are key, are subject to the Ministry's final approval before implementing any decision. This centralized system constrains private school administrations from having the autonomy to make suitable decisions according to schools and local needs. Hence, the interviewees suggested the granting of greater flexibility in decision-making.

5.3 Consequences of devolving decision-making

This theme is relevant to answering the second question of the study. Participants were asked whether there is a need to devolve the power of decision-making from central to school level or not. They were also asked for their thoughts on the outcomes of devolving decision-making to the private schools' authority. This key theme is divided into three sub-themes; decision-making devolution, positive consequences and

negative consequences of devolving decision-making, which will be presented respectively. Figure (5) summarizes the outcomes of decision-making devolutions, as indicated by the interviewees.

Figure 5: Consequences of devolving decision-making

Consequences of devolving decision-making

Positive consequences

Negative consequences

Education quality improvement

Saving time

Flexibility

Creativity

Risk of violating regulations

Risk of exploiting power
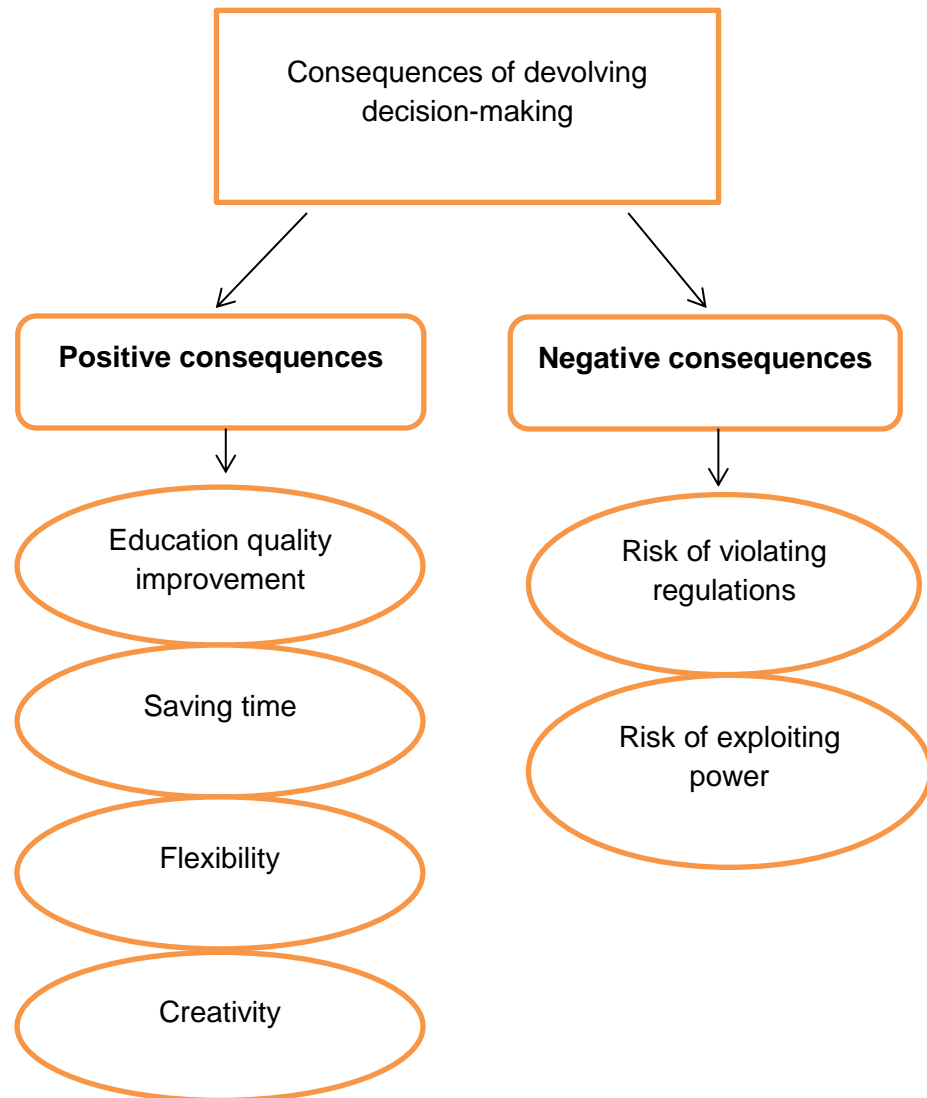
Source: The author of this study

Initially, the respondents' views regarding whether or not there is a need to devolve the decision-making authority from central to school level will be presented.

5.3.1 Decision-making devolution

Because private schools face constraints in decision-making as a result of centralized control, the majority of the participants confirmed that the schools should be granted more flexibility and freedom in making some decisions, especially in developing academic aspects (O2/BS32**;** O5/MS1; T1/QS1; T14/BS15; P5/BS39; PR3/QS1). A principal explained for devolving decision-making to schools' authority because they

"*are directly involved with students, parents and the environment surrounding the school*". There would be "*a missing link or a gap*" if decisions are made without schools' involvement (PR2/BS17).

However, twelve respondents did not support the idea of granting total authority in decision-making to private schools. Devolving decision-making authority to these schools "*should be limited in certain areas and according to certain criteria*" (P3/GS4) because some school principals may not be eligible to make such decisions and do not have the appropriate leadership ability (PR1/BS25). Additionally, one of the school owners clearly argued against devolving decision-making authority totally to all private schools. He suggested that there should be a mechanism for transiting the authority from centralization to decentralization *"according to clear vision, clear philosophy and clear responsibilities"* (O1/GS4).

Furthermore, decentralizing decision-making authority to private schools should be permitted according to certain central criteria that should not be exceeded by schools, as reported by most of the school principals who advocated this reform (PR10/BS31; PR7/QS4).

On the other hand, 17 interviewees would prefer the Ministry to involve private schools in the process of decision-making. Both should discuss the private schools' obstacles that are in the way of making effective decisions (O14/BS37). They should agree on decisions that affect children, or at least there should be a process of consultation, and the schools' voices should be heard, especially when a new reform is introduced in the education system, because school staff "*are the ones who are dealing with everyday activities and have direct contact with students and the school environment*" (T3/BS28; T4/BS23). The Ministry employees do not get to see the day to day running and practices of the school as they are based away from the school site, at the Ministry buildings (PR14/BS11).

Conversely, three owners, two teachers and a parent gave a completely different opinion. They reported that the decisions of private schools should be centralized so that there is no manipulation or confusion in decision-making. There is no guarantee that all private schools would make the right decision (P4/BS1; T7/BS26). Additionally, there may be a struggle to come up with an appropriate decision if this authority is devolved to schools, because most private school principals have insufficient experience and training, and lack the required responsibility for decision-making. Besides, the majority of owners do not have any educational background (O9/BS3).

Moreover, all of the MOE officials interviewed in this study shared broadly similar views about decentralizing decision-making power to private schools, but without entire authority. Yet it depends on the type of decision. Schools have to gain approval for the critical decisions (MO4). It also depends on the standard of the school, because inexperienced new or smaller schools might misuse this power (MO3).

In addition, the ten interviewees from the Ministry confirmed that there should be certain criteria to devolve decision-making authority to private schools. A director reported; "*We need to devolve authority with specific criteria and control, but not for all private schools*" (MO7). Another one noted: "*If decision making devolution is granted to the schools authority randomly without any criteria and controlling, the results might be negative*" (MO6).

In short, decision-making authority could be decentralized to private schools gradually according to specific criteria and controls, which will be mentioned at the end of this chapter.

5.3.2 Positive consequences of decision-making devolution

Various positive outcomes of devolving decision-making to the school authority were mentioned by the majority of the interviewees. The most significant ones are education quality improvement, saving time, flexibility and creativity, which will be presented in detail respectively.

5.3.2.1 Education quality improvement

Twelve respondents interviewed at school level indicated that transferring authority from the centre to schools could enhance the quality of education. The schools might see more improvement in the educational process in general, and specifically in their student achievement level (O1/GS4; O14/BS37; PR16/MS8; PR45/BS35). A teacher commented: "*If decision-making authority is devolved to the schools, children would improve their level. They could read words correctly and make a sentence from letters*" (T14/BS15). Additionally, students would be more controlled in their discipline, which may positively affect their studying performance, if private schools are granted this authority (T10/MS2; PR22/GS2). Furthermore, consulting with private schools in the decision-making power may encourage them to develop and improve services in various fields (P2/BS42).

5.3.2.2 Saving time

Making faster decisions is one of the advantages of devolving decision-making authority to private schools, as contended by the majority of interviewees. The schools would be able to save time by making decisions quickly, in areas such as staff

appointments, instead of having to wait for the Ministry's response (O6/BS2; O15/MS7; T12/BS27; PR8/BS1; PR33/MS4), with the schools' educational projects, programs and events being implemented in a more timely manner (PR5/MS3). One of the parents related this outcome to the previous one: *"If decision-making is devolved to the private school's authority, the process of decision-making would be faster, and it would improve school effectiveness and school quality"* (P5/BS39).

Likewise, six interviewees (MO1; MO3; MO4; MO6; MO7; MO8) from the Ministry asserted that if private schools are granted the decision-making authority, they could make decisions to solve students' problems faster, providing that they apply this authority properly, with the Ministry's supervision.

5.3.2.3 Flexibility

Having the authority of decision-making might grant private schools the flexibility to make suitable and effective decisions, according to their environment and local community needs. This positive outcome was stated by 18 participants. The flexibility in making decisions includes different schools aspects, as reported by the respondents. First, the schools would have the flexibility to act in a crisis, such as providing a suitable teacher for the certain situation, for example, in case one is unexpectedly absent, or resigns (O3/BS31), or to make a suitable decision to evacuate students from the school when there is heavy rain without having to consult the Ministry first (T2/BS10).

Moreover, the flexibility could be in controlling students' behavior by choosing to reprimand in an appropriate and positive manner, with possibly a light punishment, for example, sending the student out of the classroom, which may lead to students respecting their teachers more (T16/BS19). Additionally, the flexibility might be in selecting an English curriculum that is appropriate to both the students' and the parents' needs (T1/QS1; T12/BS27; PR37/BS1).

Furthermore, schools could have flexibility in determining their own calendar and *"school planning"* (T2/BS10). For instance, teachers could allocate enough time to present their lessons in each period, say for example, fifteen minutes instead of forty minutes depending on the topic and the objectives of each lesson (PR26/BS30).

Similarly, two Ministry officials affirmed that private schools would have flexibility in making suitable decisions, because they *"know what is the best for their students, and they can apply other enrichment programs or extra-curricular activities or work papers suitable for students"* (MO9).

5.3.2.4 Creativity

Creativity was identified by nine interviewees as a positive result of devolving decision-making to the schools authority, such as finding creative solutions to the problems that face schools. Granting this authority to school staff may give them the space they require in order to be innovative in their work, and to be able to think of excellence, and how to do things differently (O4/KS5). One parent expressed creativity by giving an example of school activities: *"Making traditional activities in the school open day for students and families would increase students' awareness of a love to learn and the place they belong to"* (P6/BS4). Additionally, creativity could be part of the educational process if more freedom in decision-making is conferred to teaching staff (T4/BS23; T8/BS9; PR5/MS3; PR11/KS6). They would be more *"active and love their work"* (PR6/BS29). Besides, creativity was also underscored by a senior official at the Ministry: *"Encouraging creativity and innovation in the educational system could have a positive impact that the schools would have if they qualify for decision-making to be given to their authority"* (MO6).

In addition to the above four positive outcomes, there are other benefits that were mentioned by seven participants. Due to their importance, it is necessary to state them. First, granting private schools the decision-making authority would increase participatory decision-making. The school employees could facilitate their work by working in close cooperation with decisions being agreed between them (O7/BS41; PR41/BS12).

Reducing the work burden is a further positive outcome of devolving decision-making at both school and central levels. Locally, a teacher reported that the pressure of school work would decrease, especially if it is carried out collectively between school staff, and not only by the principal (T8/BS9). Centrally, two principals and two Ministry officials mentioned that decentralizing decision-making to the school authority would reduce the Ministry's workload; and hence, fewer staff would need to be recruited at Ministry level as more work would be allocated to the schools (PR18/GS8; PR41/BS12; MO3; MO10).

5.3.3 Negative consequences of devolving decision-making devolution

At the same time, most of the interviewees (69 out of 93), including some of those who were mentioned in Section (5.3.2), pointed out some negative consequences of devolving decision-making authority to school level. The majority of them stated similar negative outputs and few of them reported different ones. The negative outcomes will be presented under two sub-headings; risk of violating regulations and risk of exploiting power.

5.3.3.1 Risk of violating regulations

Twenty-eight participants believed that most private schools would break the Ministry's rules if they were granted total authority of decision-making without any criteria or control put in place. There would not be any commitment to the Ministry's regulations and criteria. The interviewees' responses indicate that some schools might not obey the Ministry's rules or bylaws in different decision-making areas, if they were granted this authority; including appointing school staff, student assessment, choosing curriculum, recruiting students and defining tuition fees (O1/GS4; O10/BS40; PR8/BS1; PR19/KS4; MO6). For example, concerning student assessment, if an increased amount of freedom is granted, some schools might use an inappropriate assessment system that is below standards. They might give students short and easy tests, "*not really going to depth of education or depth outcomes of education*", which means not complying with the expected rules of learning and teaching (O12/KS3). Thus, they could deceive the Ministry and parents about the students' and schools' performance. Students might be promoted from one phase to another *"without acquiring clear educational outputs that qualify them for post-school education and become dependents on society"* (PR16/MS8; MO7).

Regarding violating the regulations of student enrolment and tuition fees, a school principal argued: *"Student numbers would be increased in some schools without regard to the size of the classroom. Some schools would not adhere to the admission age of students, and they would be greedy with tuition fees"* (PR21/GS7).

Breaking regulations related to the curriculum was reported as a concern by eight participants. If private schools are granted the power to define their curriculum, they might choose books of an inadequate level, especially if they do not have qualified and experienced teaching staff. Additionally, the chosen curriculum might include negative concepts which could accidently be taught by some of the expatriate school staff who are from different backgrounds. These concepts might go against the customs, values and traditions of the country, as well as against the Islamic religion, and in areas that are not accepted to be instilled in Omani children (T7/BS26; T9/BS9; PR12/BS10; PR26/BS30; MO3; MO7; MO4; MO10).

Consequently, decisions, as reported by nine respondents, could be made randomly (PR3/QS1; PR7/QS4; PR26/BS30) and the decision-making process could be chaotic (T5/BS23; T7/BS26; PR11/KS6; PR12/BS10; PR30/BS5; PR32/KS2); and in turn, there could be disruption in schools, as a result of non-compliance with Ministry's regulations.

5.3.3.2 Risk of exploiting power

The exploitation of power in decision-making is a more recurrent negative effect of devolving decision-making authority to the school level, as underscored by the majority of respondents. In fact, it could be as a result of violating central rules. More than 35 participants, including officials from the Ministry, mentioned that some schools, particularly if their primary purpose is to make profit, more so than an educational purpose, might use this authority to make private or personal decisions which benefit their school in general, and specific staff such as the owners or the principals. This might negatively impact on students' as well as other school staff performance (O1/GS4; O15/MS7; P6/BS4; T6/BS18; PR1/BS25; PR38/KS3; MO6). This negative point was further explained by an experienced principal focusing on the non-national administration of private schools:

> *If the schools are given absolute power to make their own decisions, some schools might exploit this authority outside of the general framework of the Ministry, and might violate the philosophy of the MOE in the Sultanate of Oman. The cultural origin of some private schools' administrations might not be compatible with the education system in the Sultanate, especially if the administration is expatriate.* (PR5/MS3)

Consequently, this reveals that the cultural identity and Islamic principles and values, which are the Omani philosophy of education, may not be maintained by non-Omani private school management, if they are granted absolute authority in decision-making.

Risk of abusing the decision-making authority were indicated in different areas by the respondents. For instance, improper and personal decisions might be made by school staff to serve particular students in schools (O5/MS1; O13/BS30; T2/BS10; T8/BS9; PR10/BS31; PR44/BS21; MO5). They could promote particular students, who might not necessarily deserve it, by giving them easy exams to *"keep the parents happy"* (PR22/GS2; MO6). Another example of risk of exploiting this authority could be in the area of appointments. Weak teachers of the same nationality of a principal or from their family, might be recruited, as claimed by principals:

> *Favoritism is one of the most important causes of corruption, which would affect the quality of education. For instance, a principal may appoint a teacher of his nationality, and may have a good relationship or through someone else who has knowledge of him.* (PR21/GS7)

To sum up, it seems that caution should be taken if the decision-making authority is devolved to Omani private schools, as this change may grant these schools some

positive outcomes, such as education quality improvement, saving time, flexibility and creativity, but it might also have negative results, such as using the authority for personal benefit.

5.4 Decision-making domains

This theme is relevant to answering the third question of the study. Interviewees were asked about the areas in which decisions should or should not be devolved, and the reasons behind this. Several specific areas of decision-making that related to general key areas were questioned; including school building, student affairs, staff affairs, curriculum and instruction, and general administrative decisions. The participants' responses in each area were summarized into three categories - centralized areas, decentralized areas and shared areas. The results of each key area will be expressed in the following sections.

5.4.1 School building

The interviewees were asked to share their perceptions of the decision-making areas related to the school building which should or should not be devolved to the private schools' authority. The responses can be outlined in the following table.

Table 14: Summary of school building areas

No.	Decision areas	Centralized	Decentralized	Shared
1.	Approving the school building and site	22	0	4
2.	Opening new classes and new stage	4	14	1
3.	Determining the numbers of students for each class	6	2	2
4.	Classroom organization	0	5	0
5.	School refurbishment	0	5	0
6.	Using the school building to collect financial support	2	3	0
Total responses		34	29	7

The table above shows that most areas of the school building, in general, should be centralized. Approximately 85% of the respondents, especially the owners and principals, claimed that the Ministry should approve the school building and its site for health and safety, and security reasons, and ensure that the building is suitable for the children's needs, and conforms to most of the Ministry's conditions and specifications.

If there is to be no central approval for these buildings, some schools might choose a cheap building, which could potentially be unsuitable for the children in terms of cleanliness, its facilities and space (O6/BS2; O11/QS3; T5/BS23; P6/BS4; PR32/KS2; PR44/BS21). For similar reasons, three Ministry people (MO4; MO5; MO9) underscored that the decision of school building should not be vested to school authority, as most of the buildings are rented and usually built for housing.

On the other hand, a bilingual school principal (PR43/BS32) argued that the Ministry has *randomly* granted permission for some owners to open their schools in buildings close to others, without applying the terms of distance, which states that there should be at least three kilometers between one building and another.

On the contrary, four interviewees believed that the validity of the school building should be shared between the Ministry and the school owner, allowing *flexibility* in the central conditions because it is difficult to find buildings as school premises (O5/MS1; PR3/QS1; PR11/KS6; PR14/BS11).

Regarding the decision of opening or adding new classes and new stages, 12 participants preferred that such decisions should be in the hands of the schools, especially if they have built premises and the required facilities, such as classrooms, teachers, equipment and science labs, which meet all the necessary requirements (O3/BS31; O9/BS3; P1/BS42; PR38/KS3; PR28/BS13; PR39/GS3). The respondents suggested that the schools should inform the Ministry with the decision only. The Ministry has no objection that the schools have the decision-making power of opening a new classroom without their approval, especially for those of higher standards (MO4). The Ministry could visit the schools to check that they have complied with all the necessary requirements, such as the Science and IT labs, stated by one of the owners (O13/BS30). The schools could be held accountable if regulations were not correctly implemented.

Concerning the decision of determining the number of students for each class, as illustrated in the table above, six respondents suggested that it should be centralized, because school owners would favour putting more children in each classroom, to keep costs down if this authority was conferred to them. Thus, the school classrooms would be overcrowded (T14/BS15; PR1/BS25). On the other hand, student class numbers should not be low, as there would not be much of a competitive spirit among them, or they may have difficulty making friend groups. It was felt that class size should be specified by the Ministry (P6/BS4).

However, 13 participants (86.6%) preferred that the authority of the latter three areas of decision-making in the above table of school building should be in the hands of the private schools. For example, kindergarten teachers should organize or change the content of the educational corners in their class according to the unit taught to children (T14/BS15). Similarly, the school building maintenance or modification should be the schools' authority if it is well organised and does not lead to any harm or potential risk to students, besides it could add to the aesthetic value, and a healthy environment for the students (O9/BS3; PR2/BS17; PR3/QS1). Likewise, as the buildings belong to the schools, rather than the Ministry, and therefore private schools should be granted the flexibility to organize cultural and entertainment events or activities for the purpose of raising financial support for the school, but this should be according to the Ministry's regulations (O13/BS30; PR45/BS35).

5.4.2 Students Affairs

Participants were asked about which authority should make the decisions of different areas concerning student affairs. Their responses were summarized in the following table.

Table 15: Summary of decision-making areas related to students affairs

No.	Decision areas	Centralized	Decentralized	Shared
1.	Admission age	34	5	5
2.	Admission criteria	1	5	0
3.	Setting discipline standards	1	7	3
4.	Students behaviour and discipline	2	19	2
5.	Suspending or dismissing a student	7	12	3
6.	School's tuition fees	31	21	5
	-Other fees; registration, books, transportation	0	3	0
	-Unpaid fees	1	14	3
7.	Establishing student assessment criteria	5	13	3
8.	Assessing students	1	9	0
9.	Setting exams:	18	24	5
	-Grade 12 exam	3	0	3

10	Exempting a student from learning the Arabic subjects	5	2	1
Total responses		**109**	**134**	**33**

In general, the table above indicates that most of the decisions concerning students' issues should be transferred to the private schools authority. Nine respondents suggested that the private schools should have their own student affairs' bylaw, but this should be approved by the Ministry (O14/BS37; PR5/MS3; PR14/BS11; PR16/MS8; P3/GS4; MO6).

In terms of student enrolment in private schools, 77.2% of the respondents, especially principals, suggested that the MOE should have the authority to determine the admission age, whereas the school should have the freedom of specifying the admission criteria. They reported that the admission age should be centralized because the students' ages may vary considerably in each grade, if this authority is granted to school authority (O11/QS3). For instance, students' kindergarten ages might overlap with those ones in Grade One. Similarly, a principal confirmed that some schools might manipulate this authority by accepting children younger than legal school age, or '*according to their whims and desires'* if it is conferred to their authority, which might have a negative effect on the student's academic level. Yet, he suggested that the school should have the flexibility to enroll any student in to a lower grade within the central age range (PR6/BS29). Likewise, all the Ministry officials affirmed that private schools should commit to the admission age specified by the Ministry, in order to avoid any gap in learning outcomes, especially if a child was to transfer to a government school (MO1; MO4).

A contrary view was expressed by a parent who suggested that the decision of enrolling children with above average intelligence or with other higher abilities, but who are under the legal age, should be shared between the Ministry and the school (P5/BS39).

Regarding the policy or criteria of registering children in schools, four school principals as well as three Ministry officials agreed that the private schools should have this authority for different reasons. For instance, good schools would like to maintain to their reputation, so they demand each student pass their entry acceptance tests as a condition for enrolment (PR2/BS17; MO4).

Similarly, the results indicate that the schools should have the authority of making decisions about students' discipline and behaviour, as well as whether or not to

suspend or dismiss a student. Participants provided several reasons for granting this authority to the private schools, such as the difficulty for the Ministry to deal with all students' problems in all schools (PR34/BS7). Additionally, schools personally deal with students on a daily basis and know more than the Ministry about the possible causes of their problems, which often depends on the environment in which they live, thus, most of them could manage such problems at school level (P2/BS42; PR10/BS31). Three respondents (O5/MS1; T4/BS23; T15/MS6) did not encourage the dismissal of a student from a school, and recommended using an appropriate positive reprimand to deal with poorly behaved students such as a reduction of marks.

Similar opinions were stated by four Ministry personnel regarding the authority of decision-making of student behaviour and discipline. They do not have any objection to private schools having their own bylaw of student affairs (MO1; MO6), but it should conform to the Ministry's bylaw. Additionally, an official from the Ministry (MO8) reported that the school should inform the Ministry of any reasons, with a detailed explanation for dismissing students in order to make their own arrangements to ensure that all students obtain their right of education, whatever their circumstances or problems.

Surprisingly, the data reveals that the setting of a fee limit is a central policy, but it allows for considerable flexibility. Thirty-one respondents (54.3%), especially the parents and principals, suggested that tuition fee decisions should be in the hands of the Ministry. Conversely, six owners and 10 principals reported that private schools should have this authority.

All of the parents interviewed (except for two), and ten principals, agreed that tuition fees should be centralized in order to protect the community from schools becoming greedy and raising school fees (P2/BS42; P3/GS4; P6/BS4; PR4/BS33; PR11/KS6; PR22/GS2). They proposed that a certain maximum limit for tuition fees should be specified by the Ministry, depending on the type of school, and should not exceed the fees of other types of schools. It was thought that some schools would unfairly increase their fees if they had the authority, especially if they had certain qualities and attributes, for example, if a school does not have a co-educational system, it may take advantage of this feature, and would increase its fees as it has no competitor in this area, as one of the PTA member commented (P5/BS39). Such schools might double their fees to an amount which may be difficult for some parents to afford, hence, leading them to having to withdraw their child from the school.

In contrast, only five principals and two owners believed that the authority of making decisions about fees should be the schools' right, because they are funded privately

and incur a high cost of financial burden, with no other income apart from school fees. They are more aware than the Ministry of their own budget and expenses (O5/MS1; O9/BS3; PR12/BS10). Also, today costs are increasing, including staff salaries, school buses and school books (PR36/BS38). The schools could not develop without providing essential facilities for students (O13/BS30; PR20/BS39). The participants argued that this authority should not be controlled by the Ministry because parents are now more aware of the quality of teaching and services, and can decide which school suits their children, according to their financial abilities (O7/BS41; PR5/MS3; PR41/BS12). Additionally, the Ministry staff are not qualified to determine private school tuition fees as they do not have an economic or business background, rather just an educational background (PR14/BS11; PR18/GS8).

Furthermore, the Ministry has no objection, as reported by three Ministry officials interviewed (MO2; MO3; MO4), to granting schools the authority to decide on their own school fees to charge, but according to specific guidelines and criteria and with the involvement of parents.

Moreover, five participants suggested that the school fees should be standardized by the MOE according to the type of building, type of school, region or school location and the facilities or services provided (P4/BS1; PR7/QS4; PR13/BS2). However, one of the Ministry's employees disagreed with standardizing them for several reasons, including the cost of the building: *"even in the same area, the variation of teachers' salaries between citizens and expatriates, and even the salary of the expatriates from one country to another is different"* (MO5).

However, almost 90% of the participants, particularly the owners and principals, believed that private schools should have the authority to make decisions on other fees, such as registration, books and transportation, or the decision on the fate of students whose tuitions fees have not been paid. They commented that bilingual books are costly to purchase, especially Science books. Also, a parent may decline their child's offer of a place at school before the start of the school year; and in this case, the school would lose students (PR35/BS9). Defining transportation fees depends on which region the students come from, whether close to the school or not (O6/BS2). Additionally, the Ministry would not guarantee the schools' rights that any unpaid fees for those students who have financial entitlements, would be paid. Some schools have 'lost' school fees and have taken such cases to court (O13/BS30; PR23/GS1; PR33/MS4; PR41/BS12).

In terms of students' assessment areas, the responses stipulate that the authority of assessment should be made relatively at school level. Thirteen interviewees (61.9%),

particularly teachers and principals, suggested that schools should have their own assessment system to evaluate students' performance without direct interference from the Ministry, particularly those schools that have their own curriculum. They justified this on the basis that teachers are more aware of their students' levels, and the suitable remedial tasks for the weaker students (T5/BS23; T11/BS8; T16/BS19; P2/BS42; P3/GS4; PR15/MS5; PR19/KS4). They also explained that private schools, especially bilingual and global, implement different international curriculum and programs which require a different evaluation mechanism, which are unfamiliar to the Ministry's staff (PR18/GS3; PR14/BS11). In order to have this authority, school staff should be familiar with the goals that should be achieved by each student for each grade, as well as the required minimum level and skills acquired (T8/BS9).

Nonetheless, the student assessment system of each school should be approved by the Ministry, as noted by two principals (PR14/BS11; PR23/GS1), because not all private schools are qualified to have this authority, unless the school is global, which is accredited to an international institution that supervises the school assessment and exams implementation. One of the principals reported: *"Some schools might make their assessment of 70 per cent classwork and 30 per cent exams. In this case, their students would easily get 99 or 100 per cent"* (PR23/GS1).

Moreover, 24 participants (48.9%) preferred that the schools should have the authority to set the exams for all grades, except for Grade 12 because they are aware of their curricula and the levels of their students, but with the supervision of the MOE (PR2/BS17; PR6/BS29; PR13/BS2; PR15/MS5). Additionally, they suggested that such schools would need to have a specialized section for evaluation, in which they have qualified and experienced people for setting exams.

On the other hand, three teachers and three principals argued that some schools could be insincere and dishonest in setting exams, if this authority is devolved to the private schools. Some school teachers might purposefully set easy exam questions, and provide the information as to the specific pages where the exam questions have come from before the exam, for some students to guarantee their success (T15/MS6; PR22/GS2).

In addition, six participants believed that the setting of exams for Grade 12 should only be in the hands of the MOE, because it is the transition stage from schooling to higher education, in which the future fate of each student will be determined according to their marks. In this grade, it might not be fair for some students if the exam is set by the school. Thus, centralizing this authority *"would give a uniform platform to judge the level and equal opportunities for learners from both the public and private schools"*

(T8/BS9; T12/BS27; PR5/MS3). Conversely, six interviewees, especially teachers and principals believed that the MOE should involve teachers in setting Grade 12 exams by asking each school to send a sample of their exam questions for each subject. The final exam paper for each subject would be chosen centrally from these samples (T2/BS10; PR16/MS8; PR36/BS38).

Regarding the authority of making the decision to exempt a student from learning the Arabic subjects, there is disparity between the principals' views. Two of them believed this authority should be devolved to school level (PR12/BS10; PR21/GS7), while two felt that it should remain at the Ministry (PR18/GS8; PR35/BS9). However, the Ministry officials reported that it is difficult to grant this authority to schools, because in any case they would exempt students, whether they met the conditions of exempting or not. One senior official from the Ministry elaborated on why schools should not be granted this authority:

> *As long as we are tied to the scholarships in Grade 12, we cannot grant the school that autonomy because we know that lots and lots of schools would exempt the kids. Then, when they come to Grade 12, they will ask for exemption saying that because they did not study Arabic in the earlier years. This is unfair for somebody to take nine subjects and sit for the exam board and then get compared to a student who has six subjects for no reason because the child has no learning difficulties or anything, just because the school decided to exempt him and again take the same certificate and compete for the same scholarship.* (MO2)

5.4.3 School staff affairs

Respondents were questioned about who should have the authority to make decisions concerning private school staff, including hiring and firing staff as well as other aspects. Their responses were summarized in the following table.

Table 16: The areas of school staff affairs

No.	Decision areas	Centralized	Decentralized	Shared
1.	Appointment of school staff	26	31	13
	Short/ part time	0	3	2
2.	Firing school staff	1	21	2
3.	Setting regulations of appointing teachers	7	5	13
4.	Evaluation of teachers	2	10	5

5.	Establishing staff's salaries	4	5	0
Total responses		**40**	**75**	**35**

Source: The author of this study

It seems from the table above that the most decisions concerning staff affairs should be made at school level. In terms of hiring school staff, the majority of private school owners (8 out of 15) wished that they had the authority to appoint their teachers and principal without having to gain the Ministry's approval, in order to save time and to recruit good members of staff (O3/BS31; O11/QS3; O12/KS7; O15/MS7). The remaining 23 respondents agreed with the owners about this concern *"because schools know their needs and the kind of good teachers who are suitable for the schools system"* (P5/BS39; T6/BS18; T15/MS6; PR15/MS5; PR18/GS8). A teacher commented that the MOE make their own judgement on whether to approve the schools' appointments or not, only from the applicant's *"papers"* and *"qualifications",* rather than interviewing the candidates face to face, which is the schools' job (T11/BS8).

On the contrary, 26 participants (37.1%), especially the principals, believed that the Ministry's approval of appointments is necessary in order to ensure schools recruit suitable teachers due to the fact that parents are paying good money for their child's education. They experienced some schools appointing members of staff without complying with the Ministry's condition. However, they suggested that the schools should have some flexibility in appointment requirements, especially the IELTS condition (O6/BS2; O15/MS7; T2/BS10; PR3/QS1; PR14/BS11; PR16/MS8; PR32/KS2; PR39/GS3). Schools should not need to provide an IELTS exam for qualified and experienced teachers. A strong record of teaching experience and performance are more important for teachers than the IELTS exam which measures skills (O9/BS3; T5/BS23).

Five Ministry officials interviewed mentioned that the authority of appointing teachers could be transferred to schools, but only to the 'good' schools and according to the Ministry's criteria, because schools need to interview them first hand to ensure that they are suitable (MO1; MO2; MO5; MO6; MO9).

In term of teacher evaluation, ten respondents, particularly principals, stated that private schools should have the authority to evaluate their teachers as good or weak, because schools are in a better position to know more than the Ministry about teachers' positive and negative points, and about their work discipline. They follow their performance in the implementation of teaching lessons on a regular and semi-daily basis. Schools also can judge their performance by obtaining student and parental

feedback, especially if parents feel there is a lack of progress in their children (T2/BS10; PR26/BS30). As a result, the decision of dismissing teachers should be made by the schools, as claimed by the majority of respondents, since the private schools pay their teachers' salaries, and follow them continuously in their performance and relationships with other staff, parents and students (O3/BS31; T4/BS23; P1/BS42; PR31/BS6; PR32/KS2; PR39/GS3).

Regarding setting school staff salaries, five school owners stated that this authority should be made by the school administration (O2/BS32; O6/BS2; O11/QS3; O13/BS30; O15/MS7), whereas four teachers requested that the MOE intervene in defining their salaries (T1/QS1; T4/BS23; T7/BS26; T10/MS2). A teacher explained: *"The salaries vary from one school to another. The new teachers have no idea of the nature of the country and living standards, and housing rental costs"* (T10/MS2).

5.4.4 Curriculum and instruction

The interviewees were asked for their opinion on who should have the authority of making decisions concerning the aspects of curriculum and instruction. Their responses are outlined in the following table.

Table 17: Summary of curriculum and instruction areas

No.	Decision areas	Centralized	Decentralized	Shared
1.	Defining the school curriculum	61	0	7
	- Flexibility of selecting textbooks of English subjects different than the central ones	0	37	4
	- Selecting textbooks of national curriculum	19	3	1
2.	Defining curriculum criteria in selecting the curriculum	14	0	0
3.	Teaching national curriculum for Omani students	7	0	0
4.	Teaching Islamic and Social studies for non-Omani, Arab and Muslim students	2	1	0
5.	Teaching Islamic and Social studies in English	3	1	0
6.	Extra-curricular books	2	11	0
7.	Defining curriculum teaching plans	1	15	3

	(number of teaching periods/ hours for each subject)			
8.	Teaching method	0	6	0
Total responses		**109**	**74**	**15**

In general, the table above shows that the majority of the participants believed that the areas relating mostly to curriculum management and instruction should be made at central level. In terms of defining the school curriculum, over 89 per cent of the interviewees reported that the MOE should define the private schools' curriculum for all subjects, including national subjects such as Islamic studies, Arabic and Social Studies (O4/KS5; O10/BS40; O15/MS7; P4/BS1; PR15/MS5). However, 37 participants (90.2%) stated that private schools should be granted the flexibility to choose their own textbooks according to the Ministry's criteria, and different than those that have been approved for subjects that are taught in English particularly Math, Science and English, but with the Ministry's approval (O14/BS37; O15/MS7; P1/BS42; P3/GS4; PR3/QS1; PR4/BS33; PR5/MS3). Several reasons were mentioned for defining the school curriculum and approving all textbooks from the central level. Although benefiting from the Western experience in education is positive, the majority of the interviewees were concerned that some schools might choose books which would be unsuitable for the level and age of their students, and would not fit in with the Omani environment, customs, traditions and Islamic religion (T5/BS23; T8/BS9; PR7/QS4; PR19/KS4; PR20/BS39).

Contrary to this, four participants, especially teachers, thought the choice of the private school curriculum that is taught in English should be shared between the MOE and schools (T11/BS8; T16/BS19; PR2/BS17). A senior teacher proposed to form a team to define the school curriculum that taught in English:

> *A committee from the Ministry and school senior teachers or the heads of each subject should be formed to study the disadvantages and advantages, or strengths and weaknesses of each proposed series of curriculum, and whether they are suitable to students' ages, and for the culture and environment of the country, in a seminar for a week. Then, the agreed curriculum, which has the most points of strength or advantages would be chosen to be taught in the schools.* (T2/BS10)

Regarding the national curriculum, over 82% of the respondents, especially parents, emphasized that this curriculum should be centralized, particularly Islamic studies

(T15/MS6; P6/BS4; PR10/BS31; PR16/MS8; PR21/GS7) because of the similar previous reasons. A principal explained:

> *I speak frankly in order to preserve our Islamic and national identity. It is preferable to have the Ministry's control of the national curriculum because it is afraid that Omani children would lose their national, moral and Islamic identity. From my personal view if this authority is left opened to the private schools, there might be negative outcomes.* (O14/BS37)

In addition, nine respondents believed that several schools might insert various content in the curricula which would contradict the principles of Islamic values, customs and traditions, because the administrations of most private schools are not Omani citizens, and have insufficient experiences to define the Islamic curricula. Therefore, their intervention might adversely affect this, and political interventions could occur, especially in most of the Omani private schools, including the bilingual and global schools, where students from different nationalities and Islamic sects. Sectarian strife should not be stirred up because some students might ask embarrassing questions about the sects. Thus, it is better that the schools apply the Ministry's textbook of Islamic studies to avoid any conflict (P2/BS42; PR6/BS29; PR18/GS8). Additionally, the Ministry has specialists, who are more familiar with the national curriculum than schools (PR18/GS8; T8/BS9). A principal commented:

> *I think the Islamic studies must be strongly in the hands of the Ministry because it needs greater wisdom than I give here. I can't help. I mean I control my experience in lots of other areas. And equally a general director here is Western too. Now we have to guarantee that our students get that level of knowledge.* (PR34/BS7)

Likewise, five Ministry personnel interviewed asserted that the authority of the national curriculum should remain at central level (MO2; MO4; MO6; MO8; MO9) due to its sensitivity, and to reserve national and Islamic identity:

> *The national curriculum should include the national culture; and thus, it should be nationally designed and selected. It should not be completely separated from students' cultures. There should be a link between the different cultures of students and be shared with other colleagues. The national curriculum represents this link in order to ensure there will be no contradiction between different cultures and Islamic sects. Thus, the national curriculum textbooks should be centralized to make sure this link is included.* (MO6)

Furthermore, 12 participants (85.7%) mentioned Arab, especially Omani and Muslim students who have to learn the national curriculum, otherwise they would not choose to study it, especially those who have difficulty with the Arabic language, if the schools are granted the flexibility in this authority (T3/BS28; P1/BS42; PR16/MS8). They also noted that both Islamic and Social Studies books could be translated by the central level to be taught to those who have difficulty with the Arabic language. A senior teacher stated: *"Personally, I think normal Omani and Arab students should be obliged to study the national curriculum to preserve our Arab identity and our Islamic religion"* (T8/BS9). Also, a principal believed that forcing private schools to teach the national subjects for Omani students is "*the only way to protect the Omani heritage"* (PR22/GS2).

Moreover, another school principal (PR34/BS7) mentioned three other reasons for teaching Omani students the national curricula. First, by learning the Arabic curriculum, students will be stronger in their native language. They would be able to speak, read and write Arabic fluently. Second, they would know and understand their religion by learning the Islamic studies curriculum. Third, by learning Social Studies, they will gain an understanding of their own country's history, culture, geography and the value of the land in order to understand their responsibility towards this in their future lives.

However, extra-curricular books should be specified by the private schools, as noted by more than 84% of the respondents (O2/BS32; PR5/MS3; PR7/QS4; PR13/BS2). Teachers may have the freedom to choose several sources to teach a particular subject, apart from the textbook itself, because they know their students' levels more than the Ministry, as stated by some teachers (T4/BS23; T5/BS23). Additionally, extra-curricular books should be selected according to the Ministry' criteria (O13/BS30; PR9/BS19; PR21/GS7):

> *The school should have the freedom to support its curricula with extra-books and sources in various subjects including the national ones according to the Ministry's specific criteria. The school should bear the responsibility in the event of non-compliance with the Ministry's specific standards and controls.* (PR20/BS39)

Similarly, an official from the Ministry agreed that the authority of choosing extra-curricular books could be conferred to the distinguished private schools:

> *Elite schools, especially those classified in the first level should have the authority to make decisions about extra-curricular activities and programs for their students, because they have qualified and experienced teachers.* (MO1)

Moreover, private schools should be granted the authority to define the curriculum teaching plan and specify the number of periods in teaching each subject according to the program they provide in order to provide the best education that they can. Fifteen interviewees, especially principals and teachers, indicated that private schools should have the flexibility to make their own teaching plan, according to what they deem to be the most appropriate, and better for their students (O15/MS7; T5/BS23; T10/MS2; P5/BS39; PR10/BS31; PR11/KS6). A principal expressed:

> *The curriculum teaching planning should be set by school teachers because they are in the field and face the challenges of time and class management. They know the number of periods/hours the lesson needs to be taught, how much time a student needs and what educational means he needs.* (PR26/BS30).

Another principal mentioned that there should be a balance in the number of periods between teaching the national and international curriculum, giving the following example:

> *Currently I have 11 Arabic and four Islamic, so that 15 lessons are for Arabic, where English is only six lessons and Math is only six lessons. So there is much less emphasis on the international curriculum.* (PR20/GS2)

In addition, teachers should have the flexibility to choose the appropriate teaching style according to students' level and abilities, as reported by four teachers and two principals (T5/BS23; T6/BS18; T10/MS2; T11/BS8; PR14/BS11; PR26/BS30). In contrast, the Ministry's supervisor with a school senior teacher or academic supervisor should intervene in teaching methods if a teacher is new and unexperienced (T5/BS23).

5.4.5 General administrative decisions

Interviewees were questioned about some general administrative decisions including the areas of school activities and calendar. Their responses were summarized in the table below.

Table 18: General administrative decisions

No.	Decision areas	Centralized	Decentralized	Shared
1.	School activities, events and celebrations	2	36	1
2.	School calendar	5	16	4
Total responses		**7**	**52**	**5**

Source: The author of this research

As the table indicates, there is a majority agreement that the decisions of school activities, events or celebrations and the school calendar should be made at school level. 92.3% of the participants, particularly teachers and principals, mentioned that schools need to implement many activities according to the "*requirements*" of the "*curriculum* or *national* or *Islamic* events", and without the Ministry's "*approval*" which usually causes delays (PR8/BS1; PR12/BS10; PR39/GS3). Nonetheless, "*certain standards*" for the implementation of such activities should be specified centrally (PR18/GS8; PR41/BS12). For example, a father suggested that schools should be independent in making extra educational activities for "*weak students in the evening*" in order to improve their level in English skills (P2/BS42).

Another principal (PR2/BS17) reported that the schools should be allowed to "*celebrate the regular*" and "*national events*", but they should inform the Ministry of their "*activities plan*" to be implemented in order to "*have knowledge and its supervision plan would not interfere with the activity of the school*" (PR33/MS4). Then, the Ministry could follow the activities implementation indirectly and "*from time to time*" (PR14/BS11).

Likewise, five interviewees (MO1; MO4; MO5; MO9; MO10) from the central level stressed that private schools should be granted the authority of making different activities without referring to the Ministry, but they should implement them according to the Ministry's criteria. They also preferred that all functions should be educational so that the children will be grow up in an educated way.

In terms of the school calendar, 16 respondents (64%) believed that the schools should have the right to set their own calendar, whether it is regarding the length of the school "*day or year*, *vocations*, *teaching periods* or *timetable*" (O11/QS3; PR5/MS3; T2/BS10; PR6/BS29). For instance, some private schools may "*like to have a longer school day than usual, and reduce their vacations* to achieve *more outputs*" (PR5/MS3).

Another important benefit mentioned by a teacher and a principal (T2/BS10; PR13/BS2) for having this authority is that the students in the cycle one level (Grades 1

to 4) would have less weight in their school bag, especially Grade one students, because the child at this stage studies eight subjects per day, and carries books for each subject, as well as other supplies in his bag, weighing up to more than ten kilos. Thus, this is a burden on his health, as well as on the parent.

Similarly, three Ministry officials agreed that the private schools should have the "*flexibility*" to make their own academic year calendar, including "*timing of school day and periods and number of periods for each subject*" such as increasing each period from 40 minutes to an hour (MO1; MO7; MO8).

5.5 Decision-making at school level

This theme is relevant to answering the fourth research question. Participants were asked to give their own perspectives about who should participate in making schools' decisions, and how they can be involved in the decision-making process at school. Issues concerning training were also questioned. This theme has three sub-themes: decision-making participants, decision-making techniques, and training (Figure 6). Each sub-theme includes various concepts. The results of these sub-themes will be presented respectively.

Figure 6: Decision-making at school level
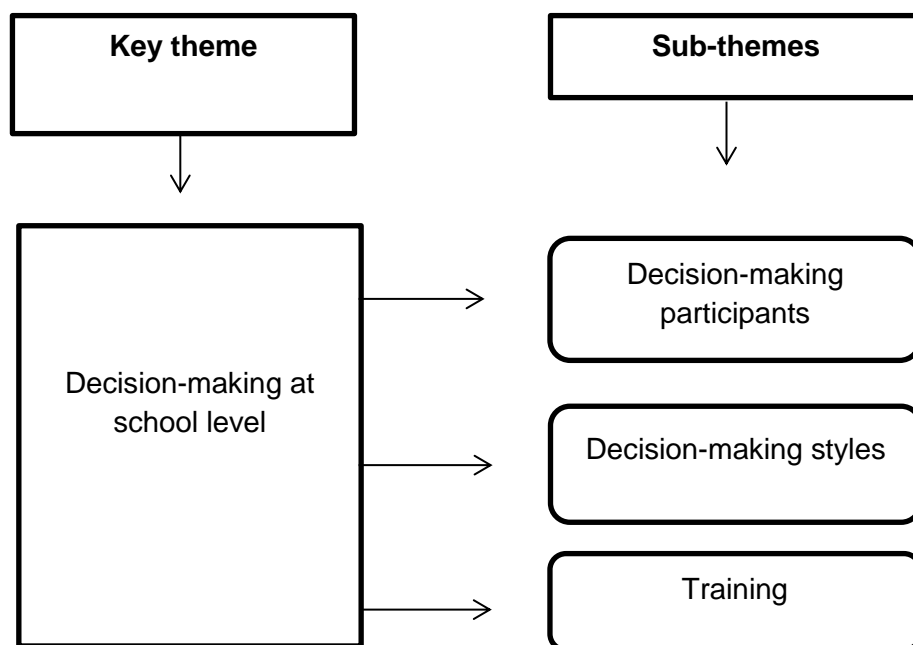
Source: The author of this research

5.5.1 Decision-making participants

There was a unanimous agreement from interviewees about people who should be involved in making schools' decisions. They proposed that there should be a partnership in making school decisions between all school staff and stakeholders, in a

democratic way in order to make effective decisions. The school owner, principal, principal assistances, sections heads, senior teachers, teachers, parents, and even students should be involved in making school decisions. However, not all of them are qualified to be involved in all areas of decision-making. It depends on the *"size of the school, the kind of the decision, the task and the nature of the work"*. Additionally, it depends on the "*qualification*" and "*specialization*" of the person and their relationship to the issue that the decision is being made about (O5/MS1; P3/GS4; T1/QS1; PR1/BS25; PR7/QS4). One of the principals was asked about who he felt should make decisions at school level and answered:

> *It is different from one decision to another. The school owner, principal, senior teachers, teachers and parents could be involved in the decision-making process. It depends on the type of decisions and the relationship of the person to the issue of the decision.* (PR8/BS1).

Similarly, the Ministry officials agreed with the rest of the participants that the devolution of decision-making authority should not be "*limited to one person*". All school staff and stakeholders should be involved in "*decision-making process*", including the "*school owner, principal, teachers, parents and students*", depending on the type of issues authorized (MO6; MO9).

The following two sections present the decision areas that school staff and stakeholders could participate in.

School staff

Thirty-six respondents mentioned that all of the schools' employees should have an input in the decision-making process. 58% of them determined that most of the schools' decisions, particularly technical decisions, should be made by the school principal, with the participation of other staff except for the school owner who could make around 20% to 40% of them (O3/BS31; PR21/GS7). The meaning of technical decisions here is those decisions that related to classroom instruction techniques and materials, such as choosing textbook for a subject or setting exams, whereas administrative decisions related to school-level decisions, such as budgeting and recruiting school employees and students (Gokturk & Mueller, 2010, p.1421).

Decisions of "*financial*" issues should be with the authority of the school owner, as reported by twenty-three interviewees, but they should not intervene in educational and technical decisions. For example, the school owner should have the authority of defining "*salaries*" and students' "*fees*", and some areas of the "*school building*" (O9/BS3; T5/BS23; P3/GS4; PR5/MS3). However, ten participants believed that if a

school owner has an "*educational background*", they may share their experience in the process of making some "*technical or administrational*" school decisions. For instance, the educational and experienced owners may give "*feedback in choosing curriculum and teachers*" (T7/BS26; P1/BS42; PR42/BS16). A teacher stated: "*If the school owner is an educator, he could be involved in technical decisions; otherwise his participation will be limited to financial matters such as determining salaries in the event of a decision to appoint a teacher*" (T2/BS10). Furthermore, as owners are the "*owner of the school project*", they should be "*familiar*" with the rest of their school's decisions in order to be aware what is "*happening inside*" the school, as reported by three participants, particularly with the "*change or appointment of a teacher*" (O7/BS41; PR7/QS4; PR15/MS5).

Likewise, four Ministry officials asserted that school owners should be key in making school "*financial matters*" decisions, and should be informed of "*other decisions*" (MO3; MO4; MO8; MO10). A senior official from the Ministry justified the involvement of owners when making financial decisions:

> *They are investors. This is their money at the end of the day. It doesn't mean that owners interfere in the daily decisions, but for example, if they want to expand, or if they want to reduce or increase the fees, they should be there.* (MO3)

School principals should have the authority to participate in all decision-making areas, as stated by seventeen respondents. They should be responsible for making technical and administrative decisions with the contribution of their assistants, section heads, teachers and administrators. They could also share their opinion with the school owner when making financial decisions, such as determining school fees (PR30/BS5; PR35/BS9**)** and teachers' bonuses (PR33/MS4).

Regarding the school curriculum, fifteen participants reported that the "*principal*" and "*teachers*" represented by a "*senior teacher*" of a subject or by a "*section head*" should be involved in the authority of choosing "*text books*" (O5/MS1; T1/QS1; P7/BS7; PR6/BS29). The interviewees explained teachers' participation in selecting the school curriculum by stating, "*Because they are going to teach it and they know students' levels more than other members*" (O7/BS41; T5/BS23). Similarly, school exams could not be set without the involvement of "*teachers or senior teacher*" because they are more "*familiar with all the curricula and educational methods*" than the school principal, as stated by three respondents (P3/GS4; T11/BS8; PR16/MS8).

Moreover, the school principal should involve teachers in making decisions about student absence (T1/QS1), as well as similar issues concerning student affairs, such as "*setting students' discipline standards*" (PR21/GS7). Not only this, but also teachers, senior teachers or section heads should participate with the principal in other school technical and administrative decisions, such as "*appointing teachers*" and setting the annual "*school planning*", because they are in the field and face challenges of school issues (PR31/BS6). One of the principals mentioned the school's experience in determining the length of a teaching period: *"Teachers and senior teachers were advised to implement a 50 or 60 minute program to change the system in place at the time of the lesson"* (PR26/BS30).

However, the school principal should be the "*final decision maker* for *all proposed ideas and suggestions*" concerning most administrative and technical matters and "*according to the school's available facilities*", as thought by three principals (PR16/MS8; ;PR26/BS30; PR34/BS7).

Similarly, 50% of the Ministry participants agreed that technical and administrative decisions should not be only made by the school principal, but with the participation of other school teaching and non-teaching staff. Four of them also believed that the principal is the key person in the decision-making process because he has "*full knowledge*" of the school's status through his continuous daily follow-up. They suggested final decisions should be made by the principal (MO4; MO7; MO8). An officer commented:

> *In my opinion, the school principal, administrative assistant and heads of departments should participate in the school decision-making process. Decisions should not be in the hands of one person only, especially technical decisions such as appointments or choosing the curriculum because each one has his perspective through his experience.* (MO1)

School stakeholders

The data reveals that school stakeholders, such as parents and students, should be involved in making some of the schools' decisions, at least their voice should be heard. Thirty participants considered that "*parental involvement*" in the decision-making process is very "*important*", and they should have some input into school decisions, especially those that "*concern their children*" (O2/BS32; P7/BS7).

However, four respondents felt that parents should not be involved in decision-making as many of them would only be concerned about their own children's interests. They were considered as an obstacles in making decisions, and do not have any active role

in the decision-making process. It was felt that they may impose illogical demands which can sometimes be inconsistent with the regulations and laws of the MOE (O10/BS40; T3/BS28; PR3/QS1; PR23/GS1). Additionally, two principals (PR2/BS17; PR16/MS8) indicated that most parents do not attend school meetings due to the time constraints of working full time, thus, schools could not rely on their participation for decision-making.

Nonetheless, 14 respondents felt that schools may benefit from parents' experience through *"the meeting of PTA, the school's suggestions box or even direct speech when they attend at the school"* (O5/MS1; O7/BS41; PR37/KS1). They could be consulted in different decisions areas, and may present some important ideas to schools to solve some student problems, especially if they have educational experience, as suggested by nine participants. Further cited areas concerning student affairs including behavioural and discipline problems, performance levels and homework, tuition fees, school uniform and health (O3/BS31; O15/MS7; T8/BS9; T15/MS6; P3/GS4; PR20/BS39). For example, parents' voices might be heard in solving the problem of heavy school bags (T2/BS10; PR45/BS35), and in issues of the cafeteria food (PR22/GS2). Additionally, they could share their ideas of determining the school's tuition fees (T2/BS10; P4/BS1; P5/BS39; PR20/BS39), although three interviewees would rather not involve parents in such an area. One of the owners argued:

> *It would be difficult to involve parents in making decisions about school fees because they would think that raising the fees would not be in their favour. In contrast, they could be involved in such decisions if they were immersed in the educational process and knew its requirements and obligations; and thus, they may then find that the fees are insufficient and support raising them. This differs from one case to another.* (O9/BS3)

Moreover, 13 participants suggested consulting the experienced and educational parents in choosing the appropriate *curricula* and type of activities in which their children wish to participate, as well as school's open days and celebrations (O11/QS3; T4/BS23; P1/BS42; PR11/KS6; PR39/GS3). Also, some parents may participate in specifying various school trips (PR28/KS2; PR42/BS16), as well as the length of the school day (PR5/MS3; PR29/BS4).

Similarly, 60% of the Ministry officials interviewed felt that parents could participate in some decisions at school level, particularly in the areas concerning students, such as school fees and activities (MO1; MO3). A section head mentioned: *"From my point of view, parents can be consulted and involved in some decisions that concern the student and depend on the field in which the parent is specialized"* (MO8).

Regarding student participation, only five respondents indicated that schools could benefit from mature students' ideas and suggestions. For instance, they may be consulted on the types of activities that they would like to undertake in the school, or the food they would prefer in the school's cafeteria, the timing of the school day, and the facilities that they would like to have in their school (O3/BS31; PR14/BS11; MO4). Additionally, they may share their opinion on how their teachers are teaching, but not officially evaluate them (O1/GS4). Student feedback on such ideas or developing a specific field in a school could be gained by distributing questionnaires to students, or via a student council (PR26/BS30).

Consequently, almost 90% of the interviewees confirmed that decisions should not be made by one single person. They should be made by different members of the school staff and stakeholders, depending on their abilities, the size of the school and the type of issue being discussed. The next section describes how those participants are involved in the decision-making process.

5.5.2 Decision-making styles

This sub-theme concentrates on how decisions should be made (decision-making style) at school level according to the participants' views. Such investigation is very important in order to discover the most effective and efficient way of making school decisions.

Thirty-six respondents described the way in which decisions should be made in schools by using similar terms and phrases, such as *collectively*, *unanimously*, *consultation*, *consensus*, *by the majority vote*, *by agreement*, *by teamwork*, *by group*, *by committee* and *from bottom to top*, which indicates that school decisions should be made in a cooperative and democratic manner (O5/MS1; O13/BS30; T8/BS9; T16/BS19; PR39/GS3). For instance, a principal reported:

> *The decision should be made by agreeing one opinion amongst participants who are different from one decision to another......It depends on the type of decisions and the relationship of the person to the decision or issue of the decision.* (PR8/BS1)

Similarly, one owner described his school experience in making decisions:

> *In our school decisions are not made individually but collectively. I, as the owner, the principal, the deputy principal, and the heads of departments are involved in the decision-making process. Everyone studies the decision and sometimes we agree and sometimes disagree, but in the end*

the decision is made by the consensus of all parties and by agreement.
(O3/BS31)

Moreover, 17 interviewees affirmed that school issues should be discussed in meetings between all those "*concerned",* and then a decision should be made by using a consultative and participatory style: *"Decision-making within the school should be in consultation and participation by more than one person, and according to all those concerned. The school principal or a senior teacher could make a decision based on the opinions of concerned people, not individually"* (T5/BS23).

In addition, some schools' procedures of decision-making can be from the bottom to the top according to their structure. Those at the bottom should be consulted and report their input those at the top (PR20/BS39). For example, "*The teaching staff report to the heads, the heads report to the deputy, and the deputy reports to the principal"* (T3/BS28).

Such decision-making styles are similar to the Alshura (Consultation) principle in Islam which is the policy of the country in making decisions. This significant point was reported by two of interviewees. One of them reported:

> *It would be preferable to have a consultation between those who are concerned about decisions. Islam orders consultation in decision-making and the Sultanate's policy in the Alshura Council has a say in making decisions. Thus, I think that the private schools' decision should be made collectively and not individually in a consultative way, so that the decision would be correct with the participation of concerned people.* (T4/BS23)

Furthermore, similar responses were reported by the Ministry officials about decision-making styles. They also mentioned similar terms and phrases (MO1; MO7; MO9). For example, a senior officer answered the question of how decisions can be made by saying: *"It has to be consensus basically. It is up to the board members. They have to agree on certain things. Sometimes they follow the majority vote. So once they agree, then they could make it a rule"* (MO2).

Moreover, there were a variety of responses towards how school's members and stakeholders could be involved in making decisions. Twenty-seven respondents suggested forming different committees, teams or groups*,* according to the type of decision, such as the appointment committee (O7/BS41; P3/GS4; PR19/KS4; PR21/GS7). Each team could include different members of the school staff, such as the school principal, one head teacher and a teacher, and stakeholders, such as a parent (PR1/BS25). A school owner reported:

I prefer that decision-making committees should be formed for each decision area in the school. The members of each committee should be the school owner, principal, one of administrative coordinators and one of the active members of teachers. At the meeting all members make the appropriate decision. (O7/BS41)

Furthermore, forming a school board, consisting of a school board management team or a board of directors, was the most popular, as recommended by 26 participants. Its members vary from school to school and should be selected according to their experience, competence, and highest qualification*,* depending on the type of decision (P5/BS39; T14/BS15; PR3/QS1; PR5/MS3; PR1/BS25; PR23/GS1; PR28/KS2). The board could preferably be headed by the school principal and should have elected members from the teaching staff, administrators and parents, who would be members of the school committee. The school committee, as reported by four participants, should report to the school board which has the authority to form these committees and approve their decisions. One of the school owners stated:

It is preferable that a board of directors in the school will be formed in order to make appropriate decisions by agreement between its members, including the school principal, social worker, senior teachers and owner of the school, especially if he is an educationalist. (O9/BS3)

In addition, 17 respondents felt that the school board or committee should have a main person to make a final decision. They preferred that the school principal should be the final decision-maker, because they have "*a high level of knowledge"* of their school and is responsible for school decisions. Yet, principals should not make a decision unless they have had input from the concerned participants (O2/BS32; O6/BS2; T3/BS28). One of the parents commented: *"There should be a final decision maker which is the school principal because members might not agree to make one decision. There might be disparity in making one decision"* (P1/BS42).

In addition, two respondents suggested that the school board should include a representative from the MOE (P6/BS4; PR17/BS24). One of them noted:

I say there should be in each school a board of management, whether the school is small or large, in order to devolve decision-making authority to the school level. It might be headed by the school principal. Teachers and one of parents as a beneficiary member of the PTA council should be members of the school board. A person from the Ministry could also be a member of the school board as an observer and a representative of the

Ministry. The decision should be made through discussion and by voting on one opinion. (PR17/BS24)

Similarly, 60% of the Ministry officers interviewed agreed on having a school committee and forming a school board (MO1; MO2; MO4; MO6; MO10). One of them stated:

We are in a democratic society. It would be possible to form committees in the schools. School members and stakeholders who are concerned with the decisions should be members of these committees, especially the teachers and parents. A school board could also be formatted which includes members of all groups in the school, including parents. (MO5)

5.5.3 Training

Interviewees were asked whether decision-making participants require training or not. Approximately all respondents regarded training as a prerequisite for all school staff, not only for those who are involved in the decision-making process. They appreciated its value, and also enjoyed undertaking training. They suggested that it should be continuous, and specific to the trainee's field of specialization. One principal reported: *"Training is very important not only for decision-makers, but for all categories of staff at school, from the school's guard or driver to the school principal"* (PR20/BS39). Furthermore, the experience of school staff is important in decision-making, but as education evolves, they need training alongside of their experience (O5/MS1; O9/BS3; T5/BS23; P3/GS4; PR3/QS1), thus being in a stronger position to make better decisions (O12/KS7).

In addition, more than 61% of the respondents mentioned that training could be executed through extensive courses*,* continuous workshops*,* or formal courses leading to a higher degree such as a diploma in Leadership (O8/BS36; T10/MS2; P6/BS4; PR8/BS1; PR15/MS5; PR25/GS6; PR32/KS2). Training could include an *exchange of experiences* with several schools in order to benefit from each other. For example, one principal suggested:

Training could be in the field of leadership especially for school principals so that they can acquire the technical and scientific skills to lead teams properly (PR26/BS30).

Moreover, several general training areas were suggested, by 27 interviewees, for school staff. The most significant were: *decision-making skills and methods, problem solving, the decision-making process, and team management* (O7/BS41; T4/BS23). For instance, one of the parents proposed specific training for decision-making participants:

They should have training in the process of making a decision, leadership, team building, school autonomy, change management, quality, teaching methods, assessment, curriculum, dealing with mixed ability students, how to deal with slow learners and talented students, financial business, competition, marketing and economy. (P1/BS42)

Likewise, almost all of the Ministry officials (9 out of 10) confirmed the importance of staff training, not only at school level, but also at central level. One of them explained that the Ministry's employees need training because many of them have come from government schools, and only have experience from such schools (MO3). Additionally, most of the interviewees from the Ministry proposed similar training areas for school staff:

They need to have training on how to choose the right decision from different options in a logical way. They need training to acquire various skills, such as the ability to talk to people properly, how to negotiate with them and how to convince them about decisions. (MO4)

To conclude, the school's staff and stakeholders who are responsible for implementing decisions should be involved in the decision-making process. They should have input in school decisions through participating in different teams or being members of the school board, which would preferably be led by the school principal. School's decisions should be made in a consultative and participatory style, with a unanimous consensus of all participants. Training is also very important for all school staff. They should be trained continuously in the field that they are specialized in, through different courses and workshops.

5.6 Requirements of decision-making devolution

This theme emerged from the data. It is important to the study in general and might help to propose a decentralized decision-making strategy or plan. It has four sub-themes (Figure 7). The results of these sub-themes will be presented respectively.

Figure 7: Practicalities of decision-making devolution
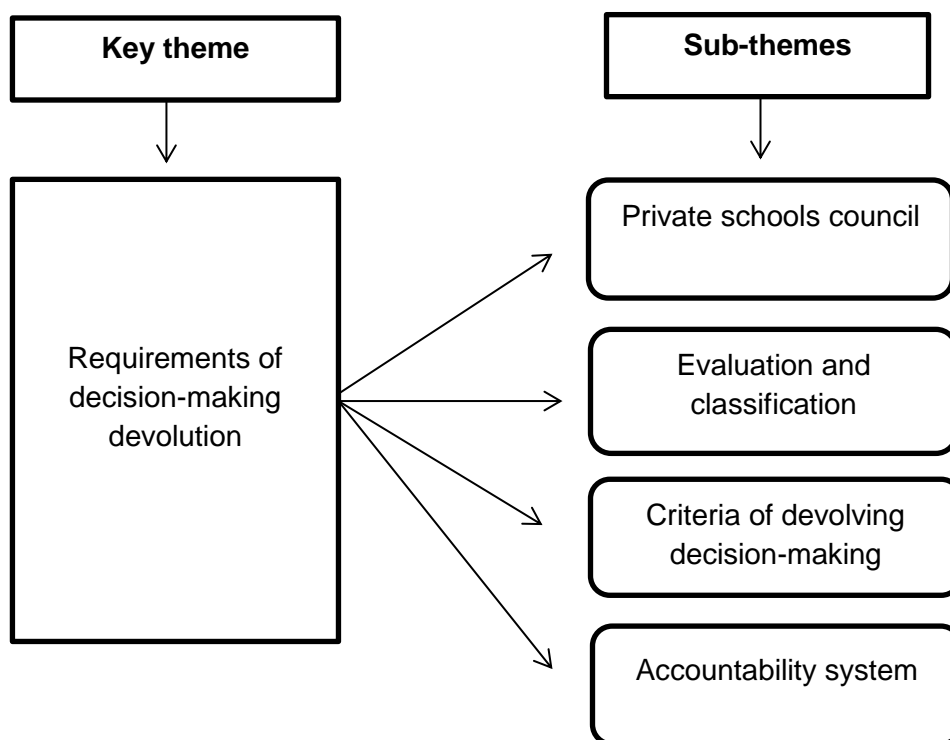
Source: The author of this research

5.6.1 Private schools council

Three owners (O1/GS4; O7/BS41; O9/BS3) and two principals (PR14/BS11; PR27/BS34) suggested that a council or committee should be formed for private schools, between the MOE and the private schools, in order to discuss all school issues. This council should have the authority to transmit private schools from centralization to decentralization, and be able to decide on the level of power that private schools should have in making decisions. It should have representative members from all of the different private school types as well as officials from the Ministry, who should be selected by the Ministry, rather than being appointed, according to the specific criteria approved by the Ministry. It was agreed that the council should meet regularly, once or twice a month. A principal reported:

> *A council for private schools could be formed or elected to decide the powers of these schools. It should represent all types of private schools in all regions. This council should meet regularly with the Ministry and should have a role in making decisions of the private schools.* (PR9/BS19)

Moreover, the respondents indicated that the members of the private school council should be educated and qualified. They should have experience in teaching as well as in private school administration. One of the owner pointed out:

Any person who would like to nominate themselves should be an educational and professional person who has an academic qualification and years of experience in education, and who has commercial aspirations. He or she should also have educational achievements through their biography. (O1/GS4)

When establishing this council, as reported by the interviewees, the MOE should specify its tasks, which could be changed at a later date by its members. The council may have the following tasks (O1/GS4; PR9/BS19; PR13/BS11):

- Setting private schools' bylaws and regulations.
- Studying the problems that arise at private schools.
- Determining the authority and legal powers that could be granted to private schools within specific frameworks and regulations.
- Evaluating private schools, starting from the head or the owner of the school and then to the supporting councils, teaching staff, the internal organization and structuring, professional development, the strategic plan and achievements.
- Choosing private schools that could be granted the power to make their own decisions, according to specific criteria.
- Specifying specific, limited powers and functions that are clear to school staff including the owner, principal, assistant principal and teachers so as to avoid any overlapping and inconsistencies in the decision making process.
- Establishing an accountability system if any school exceeds the central regulations.

After forming this council, one of the school owners claimed that the minister of the MOE or any official of the state should not have any right to intervene in the work of this council, because this council would correct the course of private education, and transfer power to private schools in order to develop education (O1/GS4).

5.6.2 Evaluation and classification
Sixteen participants mentioned that private schools should be evaluated and classified. Evaluating schools is very important, as stated by some of the respondents, in order to establish the standard of the schools, and to verify whether they are qualified to be granted with the decision-making authority (O1/GS4; P2/BS42; PR13/BS11; PR23/GS1). A technical and administrative evaluation could be carried out regularly by an independent body from the MOE, or by a supporting office from outside of the Ministry. One of the owners proposed: *"The private schools should be evaluated by an independent body from outside the MOE, which should be recognized by the Ministry*

and should not have special interests in any party" (O10/BS40). Similarly, a parent suggested: *"The schools should be evaluated by the MOE, through the GDPS according to certain standards and criteria like the Ofsted system that is implemented in the UK"* (P1/BS42).

A standardized assessment for the students could be applied as a practical way of evaluating schools and observing which schools are performing higher than others, as recommended by 14 respondents. One teacher noted:

> *I believe that what is required is the implementation of standardised assessments from the Ministry at each grade level at the end of each semester. The MOE selected student-sampling of every private school is carried out, with appropriate statistical results-analyses conducted. Correlation between these results and those obtained by the schools' assessments would determine to what extent the MOE can devolve decision-making to a school.* (T13/BS14)

Moreover, schools should be classified into groups, for example, Group A, Group B or Group C, based on the evaluation's results, as well as international tests such as TIMMS and PIRLS, and the Ministry's standardized tests, such as in Grade 12, for example (O10/BS40; P6/BS4; PR45/BS35). Accordingly, the school could be granted a certain degree of the decision-making authority. Nine interviewees suggested the authority of decision areas should be made gradually, in phases, when devolved to the schools (O8/BS36; O10/BS40; PR18/GS8) and complete power should not be devolved (O9/BS3). One of the parents stated: *"If the school will get a high level in the classification, it should be granted decision-making authority"* (P5/BS39).

Similarly, almost all of the officials interviewed from the central level confirmed that private schools should be evaluated and classified into groups. The senior officials indicated that the Ministry has a proposal for a classification project and would like to implement this in the future when it has been approved by the minister. One of them gave an example of conferring decision-making authority to private schools:

> *If private schools would obtain a higher category in the classification project, they could be granted more powers in certain respects, so that powers would be allocated according to the degree of classification.* (MO5)

Another reported:

An A school definitely would be given more freedom to do many things, but again according to certain rules, compared to D or F schools that need to take care of them in order to grow up to better levels. (MO3)

5.6.3 Criteria of devolving decision-making

Thirty respondents from both the central and local levels agreed that private schools should fulfil various criteria, standards or conditions in order to be granted decision-making authority. The team chosen to evaluate the private schools could check whether the schools have applied those criteria or not. Various criteria were proposed by the respondents. The most frequent can be summarized as the following (O8/BS36; O10/BS40; P1/BS42; T13/BS14; PR10/BS31; PR11/KS6; PR23/GS1; PR33/MS4; MO1; MO5; MO7):

- School buildings should be suitable and preferably built specifically as a school premises. They should have all the required facilities and services, and should uphold periodic maintenance.
- The schools should have stable and qualified administrative and technical staff, who should be trained and experienced, especially the school principal.
- The school should be managed by a specific organizational structure, such as a board of directors, who have a clear vision.
- The schools' outcome results should be distinguished, and measured through the results of the examinations in the Ministry.
- The schools should preferably be recognized or accredited by an international or local institution.
- The schools should have an excellent reputation without any serious irregularities or problems.
- The schools should not be newly established, but should have at least five years' experience as private education schools.

For example, a parent commented: *"All those people who make decisions should be qualified. They should have certain experience, a certain kind of education and a certain kind of training to enable them to make suitable decisions"* (P1/BS42). Additionally, an interviewee emphasized that school principals should have a knowledge of the Omani environment as well as its customs and traditions included with their work experience (PR6/BS29). Another parent reported: *"There should be quality in education and the preservation of Omani values, customs and traditions"* (P5/BS39).

Furthermore, other criteria were mentioned by participants separately. A school owner proposed:

> *The school should have a philosophy, values, goals, and a professional educational mission that is clear and understandable to all those present in the school that serve them. It should have a clear strategic plan, support plans and professional training plans. The private school should have a budget to spend on the sources of the school and a salary scale. It should have a great interest in education.* (O1/GS4)

5.6.4 Accountability system

Fourteen interviewees, especially the Ministry officials, pointed out that there should be a type of monitoring system if the power of decision-making is devolved to private schools in order to ensure that the schools make suitable, effective decisions and meet the criteria set for making decisions. They suggested that an accountability system should be set. The MOE should track these schools and there should be ongoing continuous monitoring. The schools could be followed *indirectly* through normal supervision visits (P2/BS42; PR5/MS3; PR16/MS8; MO1; MO3; MO7). A Ministry official commented on the Ministry's role; "*Our role will be following-up and checking that the school is implementing everything correctly in the decision-making process*" (MO4).

In addition, private schools that are granted decision-making authority should be held accountable in cases of misusing their authority or non-compliance with the central criteria or conditions. A teacher commented on the follow up results:

> *The MOE could continue granting decision-making authority to the schools that made the right decisions according to the agreed standard. On the contrary, the Ministry should stop granting decision-making authority to the school that made wrong decisions or violated the Ministry's rules.* (T2/BS10)

Likewise, a Ministry employee commented:

> *It is difficult to grant open powers without questioning, so there should be follow-up and control from the Ministry. There should be a line of accountability. If the schools exceed their decision-making power granted to them or abuse the authorization, the Ministry should have the right to withdraw this authority from them and to hold them accountable.* (MO6)

Generally speaking, the findings revealed that there should be some requirements of devolving decision-making authority to private schools. A council for managing the implementation of devolution of this authority should be established, comprising members from central and school levels. This authority should also be devolved if the schools fulfil specific criteria, and according to their results of evaluation and classification. Finally, the implementation of this authority should be followed-up at schools by the Ministry, according to an approved accountability system.

5.7 Comparative analysis between the perspectives of the various stakeholders

This section compares the responses of the study's participants. The research participants were classified into three groups. The first one includes school staff: owners, principals and teachers. Parents as school stakeholders are the second group. The third group is the Ministry officials. Their perceptions were comparatively analyzed according to the following research questions.

1. What is the MOE's policy in making private schools' decisions, and to what extent this system is centralized or decentralized, and why?

When asking the participants about who currently has the authority to make private schools' decisions, both the first and second groups, except three principals, agreed that the power of private schools' decision-making is strongly centralised. They confirmed that most main decisions are centrally made without an active role from school staff or parents. Conversely, only three principals revealed that limited flexibility in making some limited decisions is granted to larger schools according to specific criteria. Sometimes these schools are consulted in certain aspects. Similarly, all respondents from the third group asserted that the MOE's system in making private schools is highly centralised. Also, most of the Ministry interviewees agreed with the three principals about granting flexibility and freedom to certain private schools.

In addition, the majority of interviewees from the three groups concurred that the MOE is the main decision maker for most private schools' decisions. Schools have to obtain the MOE's permission before implementing any decision related to schools' matters. Some respondents from both first and third groups agreed with the reasons behind centralized control of decision-making and limited autonomy granted to private schools. A school owner agreed with an official from the MOE that the Omani government has a traditional and bureaucratic governing system applied in all ministries. Additionally, another reason was reported by some school staff and Ministry officials is that because the Omani education system is still relatively new and schools have not enough experienced decision makers, the MOE is responsible to ensure that Omani students are provided with quality education.

Moreover, as a result of the central control in decision-making all groups revealed that private schools had encountered many constraints in making their decisions. They confirmed that the MOE takes a lot of time in approving various school's issues due different reasons. For example, some Ministry officials concurred with some school staff that the Ministry lacks sufficient employees to handle with school's requests and to respond in time. However, some of the Ministry respondents explained that the Ministry have to wait responses to some school affairs, such as school staff appointment, from multi- authorities is the reason behind the delay of approving decisions.

Furthermore, inflexibility, strict and complicated central regulations, especially the requirement of IELTS test in hiring teachers, as well as outdated bylaws are other challenges complained by the majority of school staff. Not only this, but several of them also reported that some central decisions, especially those decisions concerning the curriculum and appointing teachers, contradict each other, and they are inappropriate for implementing in all types and sizes of schools. Likewise, some participants from the third group agreed with the respondents from the first group regarding those challenges. In contrast, it seems that parents do not aware of these challenges as no one reported about such difficulties.

In addition, a small number of respondents from the first group grumbled about the intervention of the MOE employees in their school affairs, especially the financial issues. On the contrary, some interviewees from the third group saw the intervention is necessary to ensure that students receive quality education, and according to the goals of the government. Moreover, miscommunication and resistance to change are other constraints on private schools' decision-making, as reported by some school staff. They indicated that there is no clear guideline expressing who to approach at the Ministry for various school matters due to cultural and linguistic reasons. They also reported that they face opposition from the Ministry as well as parents in introducing a reform to the education system.

2. What are the expected effects, either positive or negative, of devolving decision-making to private schools authority?

All participants from the three groups affirmed the need of granting private schools greater autonomy in decision-making in order to maximize quality education. However, quite a few of them, especially the MOE officials, did not support conferring total decision-making power to the schools, as well as devolving this authority should be limited in certain areas and according to specific criteria. On the other hand, three owners, two teachers and a parent disagreed with the rest of respondents. They

preferred that the decision-making authority should be centralized in order to be not misused by some private schools as they lack adequate experienced administrators.

Respondents from all groups expected various positive consequences of decision-making devolution including improvements in school efficiency and students achievement, saving time by making faster decisions, flexibility in making suitable and effective decisions, granting school staff the space to be innovative in their work, increasing democratic decision-making, and reducing the workload at both central and school levels.

However, interviewees from the three groups agreed that devolving decision-making to private schools authority may produce negative outcomes, such as breaking the MOE's rules and bylaws in different school aspects, and abusing the decision-making authority to make private or personal decisions in different school areas, which benefit their school in general, and specific staff such as the owners or the principals.

3. What are the decision-making areas that could be devolved to private schools' authority? and why?

When asking the participants about the areas that could be decentralized at school level, they identified specific areas that are related to school buildings, student and staff affairs, curriculum, and general administrative decisions. Regarding school buildings, most of the respondents from all groups, especially school staff, did not recommend to devolve the decision-making of school building and its site to private schools authority because of health, safety and security reasons, as well as to ensure that the building is suitable for the children's needs, and conforms to most of the Ministry's conditions and specifications. Also, a few of them agreed that the Ministry should determine the number of students for each class. However, some of them preferred that other decisions related to opening or adding new classes and new stages, organizing classroom, maintaining school building, and organizing cultural and entertainment events or activities for the purpose of raising financial support for the school could be devolved to schools authority, but the later area should be according to the Ministry's criteria.

In terms of students affairs, the majority of the participants from the three groups shared broadly similar views about the decision-making with regard to student enrolment and setting of a fee. They saw that the central MOE should have the power to determine the admission age and tuition fees, while private schools could have the authority to specify the policy or criteria of recruiting children and to make decisions on other fees, such as registration, books and transportation, as well as unpaid fees.

Similarly, all the three groups agreed, except some school staff, on private schools' responsibility of making students discipline and assessment decisions because school staff are more aware of their students' problems and levels than the Ministry. The participants confirmed that schools could be granted the authority regarding whether or not to suspend or dismiss a student. Most teachers and principals as well as some parents and central officials recommended that schools could have their own assessment system to evaluate students' performance without direct interference from the Ministry. They also concurred that the authority of setting exams could be devolved to schools for all grades, except grade 12 exam which should be centralized as this grade is the transition stage from schooling to higher education, and the fate of each student will be determined according to his/her grade 12 results. Nonetheless, some interviewees from group one suggested that school teachers could be involved in setting the grade 12 exam.

Regarding the decision-making power of exempting a student from learning the Arabic subjects, there is contradiction between the principals' and Ministry officials' perceptions. Some principals viewed this authority could be devolved to private schools, whereas some Ministry employees saw it as the MOE's responsibility and has to remain under their control.

In terms of school staff affairs, most of the respondents from the second and third groups agreed with school staff regarding granting the responsibility of teachers and principal appointment to good private schools authority if they choose their needs of good staff according to the Ministry's criteria and after interviewing the candidates face to face. Additionally, many interviewees from the first group, especially principals and owners, viewed that schools should be granted flexibility in the IELTS test requirement, especially for qualified and experienced teachers. Conversely, some parents and Ministry officials disagreed with them, and perceived that regulations of appointing teachers should be set by the Ministry to ensure that schools recruit suitable and qualified teachers.

Regarding teachers evaluations, only the respondents from the first group perceived that private schools know more than the Ministry about teachers' teaching performance and about their work discipline by following them on a regular and semi-daily basis. Hence, they demanded to be granted the authority to evaluate their teaching staff. Yet, there were no responses raised by other two groups regarding this point. On the other hand, some parents and Ministry officials agreed with school staff that schools could have the authority of firing their weak teachers because schools pay their salaries, not the Ministry. Additionally, only one interviewee from the Ministry concurred with some

owners about granting schools the responsibility of setting school staff salaries, whereas there was no perception of this area presented by parents.

With regard to the areas related to curriculum and instructions, the majority of the respondents from all groups agreed that defining private schools' curriculum for all subjects, including Islamic studies, Arabic and Social Studies, could not be devolved to schools authority, and should be remain at the central control, while schools could be given the freedom in selecting textbooks for subjects taught in English, but with the Ministry's approval and according to central criteria. Centrally approving and defining school's curricula is very necessary, as explained by some teachers and principals, to ensure schools choose suitable books for their students' age and level, as well as to be fit in with the country's customs, traditions and Islamic religion. Additionally, the research participants, especially parents and the MOE officials, confirmed that Islamic studies curriculum should be centralized because most private schools' administrations are expatriate. If they are allowed to design the curricula, they may insert contents which would contradict the principles of Islamic values, customs and traditions, and hence might negatively influence on students who have different cultures and Islamic sects.

Furthermore, none of the informants agreed that Omani as well as other Arab and Muslims students should be exempted from learning Islamic and Social studies. They should be obliged to learn them in order to preserve the Arab identity and the Islamic religion as well as to understand the country's history, culture and geography. Some Ministry interviewees concurred with some principals in translating these two curricula to be taught to those who have difficulty with the Arabic language.

On the contrary, a Ministry official was in agreement with several school staff about devolving the area of choosing extra-curricular books to schools authority because private schools are more aware than the central level about students' levels, but these books should be selected according to the Ministry' criteria. Additionally, some Ministry respondents agreed with school staff on granting school teachers the flexibility of choosing the appropriate teaching method according to their students' level and abilities. Moreover, the study participants from all groups confirmed that private schools should be given the authority to define the curriculum teaching plan and determine the number of periods in teaching each subject according to the program they provide.

In terms of making general administrative decisions, almost unanimously, the research participants agreed on permitting private schools the power to implement their activities, events or celebrations according to the requirements of the curriculum or national or Islamic events without the Ministry intervention, but according to the

Ministry's criteria. Likewise, many respondents from group one were in agreement with several interviewees from the third group about granting private schools the autonomy to set their own academic year calendar. They should have the flexibility to determine the length of the school year, day, vocations, teaching periods or timetable.

Table 19 below shows the ranking of the decision-making domains from decentralized to centralized, and the percentage of devolution, as viewed by the interviewees.

Rank	Decision domain	Devolution percentage
1	General administration	89%
2	Staff affairs	72%
3	Student affairs	60%
4	School building	52%
5	Curriculum and instruction	43%

Source: The author of this study

It is obvious from the table above that each domain of decision-making should not be totally decentralized, nor it should be centralized.

4. If decision making authority is devolved to Omani private schools, which model of school-based management is suitable and could be implemented, and how?

When asking the research participants about who should be involved in the decision-making process at school level, almost all of the respondents from the three groups affirmed that there should be a democratic decision-making between all school staff and stakeholders including a school owner, principal, principal assistances, sections heads, senior teachers, teachers, parents, and even students. Yet, their participation depends on the type of decisions and the relationship of the person to the issue of the decision. Most of the respondents from all groups agreed that the school owner should be the key decision maker in making financial decisions with contribution of the school principal in some issues, such as school fees and staff's bonuses, while the school principal should be the key person in making technical and administrative decisions with the participation of other school teaching and non-teaching staff in some decisions, such as setting students' discipline standards, choosing textbooks and the annual school planning.

Similarly, many research participants from the three groups agreed that other stakeholders, such as parents and students, should be involved or at least consulted on making decisions related to students affairs. For instance, parents' voice could be

heard in solving different children's problems concerning their performance, behavior and discipline. They can share their opinions on specifying tuition fees or selecting school's curricula if they have educational experience. Students could be consulted on school's facilities, activities and cafeteria food.

In contrast, a very few number of school staff, especially owners and principals, indicated that parents do not attend school meetings due to the time constraints of working full time. They saw them as obstacles in decision-making, and do not have any active role in the decision-making process as most of them only concern about their own children's interests.

Moreover, similar responses were reported from the majority of the research participants, except parents, with regard to the styles of decision-making at school level. They affirmed that decisions should be made collectively and with all participants' agreement or by vote, and by using a consultative and participatory style. Additionally, in order to achieve this style most of interviewees from the three groups suggested forming committees, teams or groups, depends on the type of decisions, but several of them preferred forming a school board in each school, as a model of decentralized decision-making. They reported that the school board should comprise of teaching staff, administrators and parents, and could preferably be headed by the school principal.

Furthermore, almost all respondents agreed on the importance of ongoing training decision-making participants, especially school board members, through different courses and workshops in order to make effective decisions. They recommended similar various training areas, such as decision-making skills and methods, problem solving, the decision-making process, and team management. Besides, some interviewees from the central level reported that the Ministry's staff also need training in similar areas as most of them have experience from government schools.

In addition, the research participants from the three groups confirmed that there should be some requirements of decision-making devolution. They suggested the following. First, only some informants from school staff proposed that a private school council should be formed to manage and supervise the devolution of decision-making. They indicated that this council should have representative members from central level as well as from all types of private schools. Specific roles and responsibilities of the council need to be defined centrally, but its members could change them at a later date, as noted by some school owners and principals. The respondents determined some tasks of the council, such as choosing private schools that could be granted the decision-making power.

Second, several participants from both the central level and local level plus parents confirmed that private schools should be evaluated technically and administratively by a recognized external body which does not have any interests in the schools, such as Ofsted in the UK. Additionally, they suggested that students should be evaluated using standardized and international tests, such as Grade 12 exam, TIMMS and PIRLS. Then, depending on the schools' final evaluation results, as well as their results of standardized tests, some interviewees from the three groups agreed that the schools should be classified into three or four groups, A, B, C, and D. Accordingly, the degree of decision-making autonomy could be specified for each group.

Third, a large number of respondents from all groups asserted that the schools should fulfill certain criteria in order to be granted decision-making authority. Several criteria were presented by the interviewees concerning school building and its facilities, teaching and non-teaching staff, or students results. For example, the school should be managed by a specific organizational structure, such as a board of directors, who have a clear vision. Another example is that school principals should have a knowledge of the Omani environment as well as its customs and traditions included with their work experience.

Finally, a small number of the participants from the three groups affirmed that the schools should be continuously followed up, during the implementation of the devolution of decision-making authority, to ensure their commitment to the authority granted and decisions are made properly and effectively. They recommended the need of setting an accountability system. Some school staff agreed with some Ministry interviewees that schools should be held accountable if misusing their authority, and accordingly, power over decision areas might be withdrawn.

5.8 Summary

This chapter has presented the interviewees' perspectives of the decision-making authority in Omani private schools. The participants confirmed that the decision-making process of these schools, according to the current Omani educational system, is still highly centralized with very limited involvement from schools, in limited decision areas. All key decisions of private schools are subject to final approval by the MOE, before their implementation. The interviewees argued that this centralized system is affected by the centralized governing system in the country. As a result of this centralized system, the respondents reported many constraints that the management of private schools face in making their decisions. Consequently, they suggested that these schools should be granted more autonomy in making their decisions, which in turn might lead to making school improvements. However, the results indicated that the

decision-making authority should be gradually devolved to schools, and according to specific criteria and controls, in order to minimize any negative results. Greater decision-making flexibility should be granted to schools in decision areas concerning students and staff affairs, as well as decisions regarding the school's calendar and activities. In contrast, most decisions concerning the school building and curriculum matters should remain at the central authority.

Consequently, it could be concluded that it is not surprising that the centralized decision-making authority is still acted by the MOE, due to the Sultanate's bureaucratic, political power structure. It could also be argued that the sensitivity of the Islamic culture could limit devolving decision-making authority to school level, particularly on issues concerning curriculum development.

In addition, the findings show decision-making at school level should be made in a consultative and participatory style, with unanimous agreement of all school board or committee members, who should be made up of concerned school staff and stakeholders. Ongoing courses, workshops and training should be provided to the staff concerned, particularly for decision-making skills and methods.

Moreover, the participants proposed various requirements of devolving decision-making authority to private schools, which is the focal point of this research, such as forming a local council for managing the devolution of decision-making, and specific criteria to be fulfilled by the schools. They also suggest that schools should be evaluated and classified into groups, and accordingly, the schools would be granted a certain degree of decision-making authority. This authority should be monitored by the MOE and may be withdrawn as a consequence of mis-using it.

Chapter Six: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The findings have highlighted some significant themes relating to decision-making in Omani private schools, including the centralised nature of making private school decisions according to the current MOE system, the consequences of devolving decision-making authority, decision-making domains, decision-making at school level, and the requirements of devolving decision-making authority. These major findings will be discussed in relation to the research questions and the objectives of this study, and with reference to the relevant theoretical perspectives and existent empirical findings in the wider research and literature.

6.2 The centralised nature of making private school decisions

The data confirmed that the nature of making private school decisions is highly centralized. The majority of key decisions are still centrally driven and controlled by the MOE. Some decisions are made by top policy makers in the Ministry, such as the minister or the undersecretaries. This confirms that private schools still have no active role or power in the decision-making process, even though they are granted limited flexibility in implementing the central decisions. This finding is similar to other research findings in Arab countries, such as those of Emira (2010) and Hammad (2017), who described the Egyptian educational system as highly centralized, as well as Abu-Shawish's (2016) and Sadiq's (1985) studies, which revealed that the Qatari MOE imposes a centralized model in decision-making. Likewise, it seems that the centralized system is also applied in other educational systems, including the Western ones, such as Androniceanu and Ristea's (2014) study, which revealed that the decision-making process in Romanian public high schools still remains highly centralized at a high level, and Mualuko et al. (2009) who confirm that the educational system in Kenya is highly centralized. Thus, this finding could be generalized to other countries as it is similar to previous studies' findings.

Furthermore, the results revealed that the limited flexibility given to private schools when making decisions is restricted to centralized regulations and criteria, and subject to the MOE's approval. The final say in key decisions is the MOE. Schools cannot apply any decision without the MOE's permission; otherwise, they will be referred for investigation. However, it can be argued that the private schools' administrators may have an influence on some limited and specific decisions. They have the ability to make suggestions, but they do not have power in decision-making. For example, schools have the opportunity to hire teachers or choose school buildings, but they have to obtain the Ministry's approval. In line with this, Al-Tubi (2014) points out that the

MOE is the key decision maker of Omani private education. Similarly, Khaleel (2003) indicates that staff at lower level have to refer to their higher authority before taking any action, as they are accountable to them. Besides, the PDPS states that school management can propose decisions of some limited areas, subject to the MOE's approval (MOE, 2006b).

Moreover, data analysis has shown that the majority of private schools are not involved in the decision-making process with officials at the centre. School principals and teachers are rarely called to participate. Consultation might be obtained from a select few, particularly the bigger and more elite schools, about very limited issues. It can therefore be assumed that excluding schools from involvement in the decision-making process could possibly lead as a custom for schools, and as a result it might possibly develop a lack of confidence in their abilities to participate. Additionally, the interviews' results indicated that meetings, arranged between the Ministry and the schools, are insufficient. In most of them, the Ministry officials dictate instructions and explain how to implement central decisions and directives, rather than discussing the schools' problems and other issues, and then making suitable decisions collectively. If schools have the opportunity to propose ideas, their voice is neglected. Hence, many school leaders refused to attend such meetings. Taylor and Tashakkori (1997) describe the discussion in such meetings as trivial discussions which are irrelevant to "the core mission of schooling" (p.611). Accordingly, this evidence clearly indicates that meeting private schools' staff regularly with central officials is very important to discuss the schools' matters. Also, the data indicated that involving school stakeholders, especially teachers and parents, in decision-making practices is extremely significant and may help to improve student achievement. This is consistent with other research findings, such as those of Lee and Smith (1995) and Morgan and Sorensen (1999).

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the practice of centralized control in making private school decisions is affected by the centralized governing system in the country as one of the developing countries. Also, its educational system is new. Additionally, many private schools lack experienced people, and in turn they provide a poor quality of education, as perceived by some respondents. The majority of the schools' staff are not citizens. They are from multinational and lack knowledge of Oman's cultural, religious and national identities. This is evident that why they are not trusted by the central authority, even though they have a wide range of educational backgrounds. The decision makers at central level might be afraid of problems occurring if the decision-making authority is devolved to schools. They would like to preserve the country's identity, which is the government's responsibility to its citizens. They want to ensure that schools do not misuse their authority, which might contradict Islamic values and

customs. Similarly, Hammad and Norris (2009) state that a lack of interpersonal trust among the school's members is one of the barriers of shared decision-making in Egyptian secondary schools. Another reason for centralized decision-making is that the involvement in making decisions is culturally limited because Oman, similarly to other Arab countries, adopts a bureaucratic decision-making style (Boussif, 2010). Likewise, Jogulu (2010) asserts that the relationship between leaders and subordinates in Arab countries is affected by cultural issues, which focus on social hierarchies and control.

Overall, it could be argued that the MOE has a centralized system in regulating and managing private schools because it is affected by the country's hierarchical, bureaucratic, political power structure, which is ultimately controlled by one person, Sultan Qaboos. This, in turn, has restricted devolving decision-making to schools' authority. Besides, it can be assumed that the defensiveness of the Islamic culture has a limited decision-making devolution. Accordingly, devolving decision-making authority to Omani private schools has not yet been practised.

In addition, as this finding partially supports At-Twaijri and Al-Muhaiza's (1996) and Hofstede's (1983) results regarding the dimension of power distance in Arab culture, it can be generalized to other Arab societies, particularly the Gulf countries, which have similar centralized control in management practices as they are ruled by royal families. They share to some extent similar language, religion, cultural heritage, traditions and political systems. The centralized control of decision-making has had negative influences on the functioning of school decision-making. Some constraints were revealed in making the schools' decisions.

6.3 Decision-making constraints

Evidence from the data determines several challenges that private schools encounter in making decisions. First, the centralized educational system consumes much time in approving most of the schools' decisions, which in turns delays the schools' work and issues, such as school buildings, teacher appointments, school activities, tuition fees, curriculum, and student discipline. It seems that school staff are clearly upset and frustrated by the system's time delays. This is because, according to the researcher's experience and as viewed by the interviewees, the Ministry have a shortage of staff to deal with school matters, and those that are available, do not work in groups in order to finish school requests on time. Hence, in this respect, it is important that the Ministry provides adequate and experienced employees. They should encourage them to work in a team and also provide them with relevant training workshops. Another cause of time delays, as perceived by most of the respondents, is that all private schools have to gain approval for some of their requests, especially teacher recruitment, from a

multiplicity of authorities, and not only from the MOE. This is the legislation of the government's centralized system and is out of the MOE's control. The schools have to comply with this regulation. Hence, gaining the required approval from one station, where representatives from all authorities are available, might help to minimize delays, in the case of centralized decision-making. Also, officials from the middle level of the MOE should be empowered to approve decisions, instead of having to refer them to higher officials. The Ministry should take this into consideration to solve problems with delays, otherwise, many schools might violate the Ministry's regulations. This finding corresponds with the findings of Theodorou (2006), who found that the centralized system of financial management took a long period of time in order to approve funding for schools to cover educational means and consumables expenses.

Furthermore, the data analysis indicated that central regulations restrict private schools when making decisions. The Ministry follows a strict system in decision approval. Interviewees saw that flexibility in implementing central regulations is not allowed, particularly the regulations concerning appointing school staff, and choosing textbooks of subjects taught in English. They described them as lengthy and complicated procedures. In turn, this cost the school large amounts of money and lost good, qualified teachers. Thus, flexibility is required for special cases. This aligns with previous research conducted in other Arab countries, thus, this finding can also be generalized to such countries. A study which investigated the Egyptian educational system showed that Ministerial decrees and central directives restricted school principals and teachers from participating in decision-making (Hammad & Norris, 2009). Similarly, Al-Ghafli and Al Humaidi's study (2013) indicated that the UAE school principals encountered barriers in decision-making due to imposed central strict educational legislation, regulations and laws. Al Seesi and Al Arawi's (2014) study also revealed inflexibility in the application of certain laws and regulations.

Moreover, the data revealed that outdated current private school bylaws hinder schools from making the best decisions. These bylaws are vague and include inappropriate items which are not suitable for all of the different kinds of schools. The latest private school bylaw was established in 2006. Since that time it has not been updated and several new areas have been introduced and developed. The number of private schools has increased, as shown in the context. New programs have been introduced. Similarly, the student affairs bylaw is not appropriate to solve current students' problems in private schools, but is more suitable for the government schools, thus, the bylaws need to be updated. There should be different bylaws according to the type of school in order for the regulation to be clear and to facilitate private schools' work. Each school could have its own policy concerning student disciplinaries.

In addition, the interview data shows that some central decisions contradict others, either inside or outside the MOE. Because the MOMP is responsible for all of the country's workers, Omanis and expatriates, in the private sector, they follow their own regulations to approve the employment of private school employees. Some of their regulations contradict the MOE's requirements of school staff appointments. Thus, it is essential that a labour law should be established for private educational institutions to overcome such difficulty. Additionally, contradiction in the MOE's regulations in decisions concerning curriculum issues confuses the schools, making it difficult to decide which regulations to follow. Also, some of the central instructions are inappropriate for the type and size of the school. Accordingly, involving schools in the decision-making process could help to make suitable and clear decisions.

Another constraint encountered by the schools in decision making, as revealed in the data analysis, is the MOE's intervention in school matters, including financial issues such as unpaid fees, staff salaries, allowances and leave. Some Ministry employees, as indicated by the interviewees, asked schools to make changes in the school building, despite it being approved by the central authority. They also intervened in the style of teaching the bilingual and international curriculum. This finding is consistent with Joshee's (1994) results, which revealed that private schools encountered obstacles because of external interference from the centre. Thus, reducing the Ministry officials' intervention in approved school's issues is recommended, unless there is a risk for students. This is in line with the recommendation of Androniceanu and Ristea (2014) who suggested minimizing school inspectorate interferences in human resources management.

Furthermore, the data indicated that private schools are not supported due to poor communication with the Ministry officials. There are no clear guidelines on communicating with those concerned in the Ministry to assist the schools in making decisions. School leaders find it difficult to communicate with Ministry employees as most of them are non-English speakers, as well as due to cultural reasons. Most private school members are expatriates, who come from different cultures and have different educational backgrounds. This finding is similar with previous studies in different cultural contexts. For example, Al Seesi and Al Arawi (2014) found that weak communication channels between central and school level was one of the administrative obstacles facing Saudi school headmistresses in the SBM implementation. Another evidence from the literature in Western countries, like the USA and Australia, identifies a lack of support from central authorities as a barrier to decentralizing decision-making at school level (Blasé & Blasé, 2001; Cranston, 2001). Hence, this is an evidence that this finding can be generalized as a decision-making

constraint in the centralized educational systems, either in Arab or other international countries.

Moreover, the analysis of the interviews revealed a resistance from the central authorities to decision-making devolution, although educational initiatives are encouraged by the higher authorities. This finding corresponds with the findings from previous Arab studies investigating the SBM implementation, which indicated a weakness of the MOE leaders' conviction about the importance of devolving authority, as one of the obstacles facing public schools (Al Seesi & Al Arawi, 2014). Losing power or a lack of trust might be the reasons for their resistance, but the data showed religious reasons behind the resistance to devolve decision-making authority. Schools are not allowed to hold a Christmas party, for example, because the majority of students are Muslims. Resistance to change, such as introducing A-levels in the international programs, was also revealed by some parents. This is due, as commented by the parents, to the fear of their children losing marks in the international exams compared to national ones. Also, some parents refused to allow their children to learn music and sport because of the religious reasons. Thus, it seems that the nature and sensitivity of the Islamic/Omani culture is one of the limitations, if not the main resistance, to devolving of decision-making power, because the MOE is affected by the country's traditional power structure, control over the role, function, amount and content of the national curricula, particularly the Islamic Studies curriculum. This point can be a unique contribution to the literature.

Therefore, organizing face-to-face meetings between decision makers at the MOE and private school leaders to exchange ideas and explain any ambiguity regarding the need for devolving the decision-making authority is important to minimizing resistance to change. Thus, the reasons for traditional and cultural resistance would be understood and both parties would reach an agreement of decision-making domains, and how to devolve this authority. Also, open communication channels between school members and the local community to explain the change, plus providing them with sufficient information in order to understand it, could reduce resistance from parents and students. Additionally, involving school stakeholders at central and school levels in the decision-making process might minimize any resistance (Anderson, 2011; Boohene & Williams, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013).

6.4 Implementing the reform of decentralized decision-making

Due to the constraints that Omani private schools face in the process of decision-making, the findings reveal that these schools could be granted decision-making authority because school staff, particularly teachers, are directly involved with students

and parents. Supporting this finding, educational researchers claim that school decisions can be better made by those who are involved in the teaching and learning operation at schools, and who are closest to the students (Caldwell & Spinks, 2005; Galiani et al., 2008; Hammad & Norris, 2009; Ho, 2006; Vegas, 2007; Williams et al., 1997). Also, this finding is compatible with the findings of previous studies investigating decision-making authority in different contexts, which recommended granting schools more autonomy in decision-making (Al- Ghafli & Al Humaidi, 2013; Al-Musleh, 1988; Al Seesi & Al Arawi, 2014; Bandur, 2012; Fung Wu & Tseng, 2005; Joshee, 1994; Hammad, 2017; Mansoor, 2004). Hence, this similarity in findings of various researches clearly suggests conferring schools in other educational systems, especially in the Gulf countries, greater flexibility in decision-making. Moreover, evidence clearly indicates from the perspectives of respondents that the decision-making process could be shared between both the central and school levels. It is prerequisite to consult school staff, as decision implementers, and to hear their voice, because they are in the field and have direct contact with the students, and also know more about the school environment than the Ministry. The literature indicates that effective decision-making needs an arrangement of power-sharing between the central authority which sets the policy and those at the lower level who carry it out (Elmelegy, 2015).

However, many interviewees disagreed on decentralizing decision-making authority to Omani private schools entirely. They could be granted this power gradually and according to specific and flexible criteria determined by the central authority. This finding is in agreement with Al-Taneiji and McLeod's (2008) study, who found the implementation of decentralization should be gradual in order to increase its chances of success.

Consequently, the data have shown that there is a need to grant Omani private schools greater autonomy in decision-making, but total decision-making power is not recommended. This authority could be conferred to the schools gradually. Also, power-sharing between the MOE and private schools in the decision-making process is very important to make effective decisions. This finding is extremely significant to the Omani context when decision-making decentralization is implemented.

Furthermore, transferring decision-making to a school's authority, as perceived by participants, depends on the type of decision, and on the standard of the school. Not all schools are qualified to have this authority, especially those which violate regulations and have weak education quality. Hence, devolving decision-making requires an evaluation and analysis of the school environment to determine its strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities and threats, of devolving decision-making (Elmelegy, 2015). Additionally, it could be argued that decision-making devolution is not a simple task. It needs a strong plan to devolve this authority to schools. Besides, evidence from the data clearly suggests that the conviction of central authority about the decision-making devolution is essential, as well as the role and level of school involvement in the decision-making process needs to be made very clear. The MOE need to establish a legislative basis to grant schools this authority. Other requirements for devolving decision-making authority will be discussed later.

Moreover, it is evident from the interviews data that some decision-making areas would preferably be controlled by the central authority rather than transmitted to the schools' authority, and some domains could be decided by both parties. These domains will be discussed clearly later in this chapter. The advantages, as well as disadvantages, of devolving decision-making are revealed from the data analysis will be discussed in the next two sections.

6.5 Positive outcomes of devolving decision-making authority

The study showed several benefits of decision-making devolution. First, decentralizing the decision-making authority to school level would enhance education quality. Improvements in the teaching-learning process might be more likely when the decision-making process is practiced by different school stakeholders, resulting in improved effectiveness and quality of decisions. It also leads to better teacher performance in teaching, which in turn might improve student achievement. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies exploring the effects of decision-making decentralization in different countries. Cheng and Cheung (2003) found that school self-management improved teacher job performance and enhanced school performance. Similarly, other studies revealed the devolution of decision-making authority to school sites resulted in improving school performance in the educational process and, hence, student achievement (Bandur, 2012; Brown & Cooper, 2000; Chen, 2011; Galiani & Schargrodsky, 2001; King & Özler, 1998; Lam, 2006). Additionally, the study of Carr-Hill et al. (2016) found positive and significant improvements in students' language and Mathematics test scores, as well as the reduction of student drop-out and repetition. However, these findings seem to contradict some studies' results (Dempster, 2000; Jimenez & Sawada, 1999; Nasser-ghodsi & Owen, 2006; Sharpe, 1996) which revealed that there is no direct relationship between decision-making devolution and student performance. Consequently, this finding is not recommended to be generalized as the devolution of decision-making to schools does not always have positive effects on student outcomes.

Beside improvement in student achievement, the data indicated student discipline, particularly those with behavioural issues, would be more controlled if the decision-making authority will be devolved. However, it is worth noting that improvements in student performance and in their discipline control might be difficult to achieve without the process of change in schools, such as teaching and learning improvement and a collegial working school environment among different school stakeholders (Bandur, 2012).

Moreover, the interview analysis showed that schools would make their decisions more efficiently and on time if decision-making was transmitted to their authority. They would not need to wait for central authority approval, in such areas as teacher appointments. Schools would solve their students' or staff's problems in a timely manner, thus, saving time would be another advantage of decision-making devolution. As indicated in the literature, transferring power to school level assists the schools' administration to make decisions "faster, more informed, more flexible, and more responsive to local needs" than decisions made at central level (Hanson, 1997 p.6; Rondinelli et al., 1990). Also, there were similar findings by Theodorou (2006) who reported that decisions would be addressed more speedily if they were made by those closer to the point of service. Likewise, this finding is supported by other researchers. Beck and Murphy (1998) claim that decentralizing decision-making to schools saves time for school staff. The participants in Al-Taneiji and McLeod's (2008) study perceived that they would make decisions much quicker under decentralization, and be more of a fit for the schools' environment and students' needs.

In addition, the data revealed that devolution would increase flexibility in making suitable and effective decisions, according to schools' environment and local community needs. Because school staff, especially teachers, are close to students, they are more likely to make the right decision and to act in different difficult situations. They could deal with some crises that occur during the school day, and choose textbooks that suit students' various levels and needs. Evidence from the literature indicates that decision-making devolution provides administrators greater flexibility to utilize creative approaches to solve school problems, and to respond more effectively to local community needs, such as adapting curriculum content to students' levels and parents' desires (Bullock & Thomas, 1997; Elmelegy, 2015; Gamage & Zajda, 2009; Rondinelli et al., 1990). This finding is in line with the finding of Clark's (2009) study which analysed the effects of the grant maintained British reform process. He found that autonomous public schools have increased flexibility in hiring, firing and paying teachers. Similarly, Gamage's (1996) research findings demonstrated that devolving authority to school administration may encourage flexibility in decision-making.

Furthermore, creativity is another positive consequence of devolving decision-making authority to private schools, as the data indicated. According to Beck and Murphy (1998), central regulations and rules restrict educators' creativity. Creativity can be used in different educational processes. For instance, teachers can use creative teaching methods, which in turn might lead to positive results in student learning outcomes. This finding is in agreement with the results of Al-Taneiji and McLeod (2008) who found that teachers perceived that they would be creative in their work if decentralization was applied. Thus, it seems that school staff, especially teachers, would be innovative in their work if they are granted decision-making authority.

In addition, consistent with the findings of Bandur (2012) and Madsen (1997), the results of the current study revealed that granting autonomy to private schools in decision-making would increase democratic decision-making among school members and stakeholders, which in turn may reduce the principal's work burden. In contrast, some studies' findings contradict this finding. School staff, especially teachers, raised the issue of the difficulty of balancing their main duties and the involvement of school management (Blasé & Blasé, 2001; Cameron, 2005; Cranston, 2001; Malen & Ogawa, 1988; Muijs & Harris, 2007). For example, teachers might face difficulty in dividing their limited time between teaching their students and participating in the administrative decision-making process. Hence, this might have a negative effect on the creativity of the teaching process, and on student achievement, as well as on the effectiveness of decisions. Accordingly, this contradiction indicates that not all teaching staff could be involved in all types of decisions. They can be involved only in the decisions that concern them and their students, especially in private schools where the focus of teachers should be more on increasing students' performance. Conversely, heads of sections, departments or subjects, and senior teachers can be involved in some decisions concerning school management.

6.6 Negative consequences of devolving decision-making authority

The data analysis indicated two significant disadvantages of decision-making devolution; risk of violating regulations and risk of exploiting decision-making power. First, some schools might not obey regulations, especially schools whose main aim is profit rather than educational gain. Many respondents from both central level and school level (T8/BS9; PR21/GS7; PR32/KS2; MO6) commented that most of the private schools focus on profit more than quality in education, thus, the results might be negative if decision making devolution is granted to the schools authority randomly without any criteria and controlling. They cited various negative outcomes including decreasing the students' education level, appointing unqualified and cheap teachers and providing cheap educational materials like curricula and laboratories. Additionally,

they noted that some private schools would not commit to the rules and criteria of different areas, including appointing school staff, student assessment, choosing the curriculum, recruiting students, and defining tuition fees. Regarding choosing the curriculum, for example, they might choose inappropriate textbooks for the students' educational level, or have negative views of the Islamic culture. Because the majority of private school staff are expatriates, they might make some decisions which contradict the country's customs and traditions.

Moreover, school staff might exploit the decision-making authority if decentralization is implemented, as the data revealed, especially those who do not respect the rules. Exploiting decision-making power could be in terms of making personal decisions that benefit the school or a person's own interests, such as the school owner or principal, if this authority is in their hands. Since these schools are private institutions and their main aim is profit-making, plus the majority of them are managed by non-national administrations, some may be more likely to violate the decision-making power for their own benefit. For instance, unqualified and low paid teachers might be recruited, or there could be cases of students from wealthy families could be promoted. Evidence from the literature supports this thought. Al-Taneiji and McLeod's (2008) study indicates that favouritism or personal preference could be one of negative outcomes in decentralization. Thus, this might result in increasing opportunities for corruption at local level (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2002; Prud'Homme, 1995; Treisman, 2002). Consequently, some provisions are necessary to be included if decision-making is devolved to private schools authority to prevent, or at least to reduce, corruption, such as granting this authority according to specific criteria with following schools continuously and applying accountability system, which will be discussed later. Also, it is not recommended to devolve decision-making areas to the authority of schools which have significant irregularities, as they might not comply with central polices, bylaws and regulations. On the other hand, it is important to hear the voice of schools in order to enhance democracy in decision-making.

6.7 Decision-making domains

The data analysis revealed that several areas of decision-making could be devolved to Omani's private schools' authority, while others would better remain under central authority. The findings of each domain will be discussed in the following sections.

General administration

The results indicated that decision areas under the general administration domain are the highest level to be decentralized to the Omani private schools authority. The data analysis showed that these schools should be granted the authority to implement

educational and non-educational activities, according to the requirements of the curriculum or students' needs, without the central approval which usually delays matters. Implementation of national or Islamic events and celebrations should also be in the hands of the schools' authority, as these are well-known events at both levels. These findings are aligned with the findings of Al-Taneiji and McLeod (2008) who provide evidence that curriculum activities should be the responsibility of schools, if the decentralization reform is implemented. Similarly, several researchers claim that decentralization grants schools the authority to carry out their teaching and learning activities outside the classroom, without any restrictions from the central level (Abu-Duhou, 1999; Bandur, 2008; Beck & Murphy, 1998; Gamage & Zajda, 2009). It can be assumed that empowering schools to make decisions related to academic and non-academic activities may affect the improvement of student achievements, especially for those students who are weak in some subjects. This is supported by the response of one of the parents interviewed (P2/BS42). This thought was also supported by Bandur's (2008) findings. In contrast, this result is inconsistent with the findings of Al Kaabi's (2015) study that shows a low desire from school staff to participate in the decisions of non-educational activities. Thus, organizing non-educational school activities, such as trips, would be better undertaken by administrators, rather than teaching staff, who might refuse participating in such activities, especially if they have heavy workloads in teaching and extra-curricular activity implementation, otherwise, they could perceive their involvement in such activities as a burden which would influence negatively on their teaching quality, and in turn this might affect negatively student outcomes. Results from other studies support this claim (Abu-Shawish, 2016; Hammad, 2017; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998) which indicates that involving teachers in these types of activities could hinder decision-making devolution, as they lack time to make these decisions. Moreover, teachers in private schools may request certain incentives to encourage them to participate in administrative and non-academic decisions, such as increasing salaries and minimizing their teaching workloads. This thought is supported by the findings of Al-Taneiji and McLeod's (2008) study which showed that teachers request certain conditions, similar to those mentioned above, to implement more responsibility in decentralization reform. Hence, in order to reduce the workload of school teachers and to focus on their teaching quality, educational activities related to curriculum could be their responsibility, whereas non-academic activities are better implemented by school administrators.

Moreover, the findings indicated that schools should have the authority to set their own calendar, including the length of the school day or academic year, vocations, teaching periods or timetabling, according to the Ministry's criteria. This finding is parallel to Abu-

Shawish (2016), who found that teachers should be more involved in preparing school calendars. A possible explanation for this seems to be that there are different types of Omani private schools that implement different programs and curricula, and have different requirements. For example, the global schools have international requirements, not similar to other schools which apply the national programme. Thus, the particularity of each school should be taken into account in setting the school calendar.

However, in the researcher's opinion, decentralizing such administrative decisions to school authority should be according to certain criteria specified centrally in order for the outcomes to be positive, and to ensure schools maintain the educational goals of the Ministry, and according to the philosophy of education, especially most Omani private school administrations who are non-national and have come from cultures that differ from the Omani culture. This would also include the need for the Ministry to follow-up on the implementation of such decisions indirectly.

Staff affairs

The interviewee analysis shows that private schools would like to have the decision-making authority concerning school staff affairs. It seems that since the schools pay their staff and have knowledge of the kind and quality of teachers that fit their system and local needs, the authority of hiring and firing school staff, and defining their salaries, could be granted to schools. Positive effects on education quality in schools, especially on student learning outcome, has been documented in the literature from devolving this authority to schools (Chen, 2011; Elmelegy, 2015). Nonetheless, the data analysis revealed that schools should implement the Ministry's conditions in staff employment and grant them some flexibility in some of their requirements, like the IELTS, in order to ensure they appoint qualified and experienced teachers. Another explanation, as evident from the data, for centralizing appointment conditions is to ensure that teachers are assigned to their actual and desired practices, rather than teaching subjects other than their specialty. It appears that some principals and owners want to assign teachers according to their abilities regardless of their qualifications and experiences (PR23/GS1; O2/BS32). Additionally, the data shows that the evaluation of teachers could be devolved to the authority of private schools, because schools know more than the Ministry about their own staff's work, performance and discipline, by following them continuously, directly or indirectly, as well as on a regular and semi-daily basis. On the contrary, this does not mean that the evaluation from the Ministry supervisors is not important, but it supports both schools and teachers when problems occur. These finding are consistent with the results of several studies which indicated a

strong desire from school administrators and teachers to have more power in areas related to staff and teachers affairs (Al-Taneiji & McLeod, 2008; Di Gropello, 2006; Hammad, 2017; Jubran & Al-Shammari, 2011; Kuku & Taylor, 2002; Thida & Joy, 2012). Conversely, these findings are inconsistent with Mansoor's (2004) results that revealed staff affairs should remain central. Similarly, the findings seem contrary to those found by Al Kaabi (2015) in her study, which showed the lowest desire of involving UAE public school staff was in the authority of hiring new personnel. Also, contradictory to the current study's findings, Ho's (2006) study revealed that salary setting was centralized.

On the other hand, evidence from the literature indicated that nepotism, favouritism, bribery and corruption could be practised when schools have the power of hiring and firing staff without central intervention (Mansoor, 2004; Wadesango, 2010). This claim is supported from the data of the current study. Some respondents indicated that principals might recruit teachers from among their relatives or own nationalities, or from their own particular interests. Also, owners might recruit low paid, unqualified or inexperienced staff. Accordingly, although the data shows that private schools would desire to be granted the authority of school staff appointment, especially teachers, it is not advised to generalize this finding to other Omani settings because it has disadvantages . The Ministry should take into its account, that most private schools are mainly concerned with profit. If this area is devolved to the private schools authority, there should be a way to make sure that they will only employ qualified and experienced staff, at least to minimize likely unfair practices. For example, establishing school recruitment committees comprised of different school members and stakeholders might be helpful to avoid any misuse of this authority, otherwise, the Ministry may withdraw this power from some schools.

Student affairs

Consistent with the findings of various studies (Abu-Shawish, 2016; Al Kaabi, 2015; Al-Taneiji & McLeod, 2008; Bandur, 2012; Hammad, 2017; Jubran & Al-Shammari, 2011) which indicated that the areas of student affairs, such as admission, discipline, and assessment should be devolved to school authority, the data of this study revealed that most of the decisions related to student matters could be devolved to Omani private schools authority. This includes recruiting students according to school policy, setting student discipline standards, managing behaviour and discipline problems, suspending or dismissing a student, and their assessment. The results suggested that it is preferable for each school to have its own students' affairs policy. In term of student admission, the findings revealed that schools can apply their own system regarding

student registration. For example, some schools prefer to implement an admission exam in different subjects, and interview students to know more about their abilities and also those areas where they are weaker. However, the data analysis indicated the student's admission age should remain the responsibility of central authority, to avoid making any personal decisions. Currently, the MOE defines the specific admission age range of student registration for KG1 and 2, and Year One, which was considered acceptable by most of the respondents. This may help to maintain equality in admitting students in all private schools without any nepotism. Also, according to the educational statistics data in the MOE (see Section 2.3.2.2 in Chapter Two) the number of students in Omani private schools has increased since the academic year 2004/2005. Therefore, there seems to be strong evidence that centralizing the admission age authority may not negatively impact on student enrolment in these schools.

Moreover, the data analysis suggested that the decisions relating to student discipline and behaviour could be devolved to Omani private schools authority. The schools could have the autonomy to enforce whichever type of punishment they see fit to use for badly behaved students, either giving them extra homework, or involving them in various co-curricular activities, or whether or not to suspend or dismiss them for a short or long period of time, depending on their problem and the school policy, which could be defined by school. An explanation for granting this authority to private schools, as evident from the data, is that these schools recruit different students from different areas, nationalities and social status. They also revealed that they are very close to students and in direct contact with them and know more about certain problems that they have, more than the Ministry.

Surprisingly, despite the fact that Omani private schools are not funded by the government, the findings revealed that the decision of determining student tuition fees is seen as the responsibility of the central authority in order to avoid greedy owners from increasing them to an amount that would be difficult to pay for some parents. Thus, devolving this authority to schools would impair the equality of access to private educational services, especially for low-income families. However, several respondents, especially owners suggested fee decisions should be the schools' authority, which is similar to the results of Bullock and Thomas (1997), because profit making is the main aim of their schools as they are private institutions, and have many financial burdens. Besides, parents have the option to choose the school that best fits their budget. Hence, the researcher feels that the voice of the schools regarding tuition fees should be heard, since there is no governmental fund or other source of financing for these schools, except fees. The decision could be shared. The general framework, criteria or guidelines for increasing fees can be set by both parties although owners

opposed any restrictions on their financial decisions. Conversely, the data analysis indicated schools could be granted the authority to define other fees such as registration, books and transportation, as well as making suitable decisions for those students who have financial entitlements which have not been paid, provided that they would not be deprived from their schooling.

Furthermore, the study found that schools could have their own assessment policy to evaluate their students' performance according to school programs and curricula, which differ from bilingual to international schools. This finding aligns with what is documented in the PDPS (MOE, 2006b) which indicates that private schools may follow their own assessment system, but this is subject to Ministry approval. Additionally, the study revealed exams should be set locally by each school for all grades, except for Grade 12, which should be standardized. Grade 12 students can compete for governmental scholarships to study higher education, depending on their result. Accordingly, standardized tests in Grade 12 would be fair for all students. Grade 12 exam questions might be leaked if they are set by the schools; and thus, there could be no credibility of examinations. Hammad (2017) found similar findings in his study which indicated monthly exams were set by schools. In contrast, this finding is inconsistent with the result of Wößmann's (2003) study, which revealed that there was a significant relationship between student performance in Math and Science and centralized examinations. Accordingly, it could be argued that devolving the setting of exams to school authority does not always have positive results in student outcomes, despite of the evidence from the literature which suggests a positive correlation between devolution and student achievement (Bandur, 2012; Brown & Cooper, 2000; Chen, 2011; Lam, 2006). Centralized exams could ensure that schools, especially those at a lower level, perform well and prepare their students for such exams. This thought was also supported by some of the participants of this study (PR4/BS33). Thus, devolving this authority is very sensitive and could be encountered with resistance from the local community, if the results were disappointing. Hence, the MOE again should take this into consideration. Transmitting the exam setting to school authority should be controlled and regulated by the Ministry to avoid any misuse, and their intervention is essential. Exams, particularly finals, could be set by schools, but should be set according to specific criteria specified centrally, and could also be checked by the Ministry supervisors.

In addition, evidence from the data analysis clearly indicates that most of private schools would not comply with the conditions of exempting students who are weak in the Arabic language from learning Arabic subjects, thus such decision should be made at the MOE. Preserving the mother tongue is a strong explanation for such a decision.

Besides, some non-Arab schools' administrations, who lack an understanding of the importance of the Arabic language in Arab society and culture, might exempt those students whether they fulfil the Ministry's criteria or not, if this authority is in their hands. Also, some parents may request that their children are exempted, especially those who are stronger in other English subjects, in order to gain full marks in all subjects, hence, giving them more of a chance to gain a scholarship after Grade 12.

School building

For safety and security reasons most areas of the school building, as the data indicated, should be approved centrally, especially school premises. Although private schools management has an indirect influence on the decision of choosing the school building, according to certain conditions, the building should be subject to the approval of higher authorities, including the MOE, which is the final decision maker. Besides, the majority of current rented school buildings were built as residences, which need to be modified as school buildings, according to specific central specifications and conditions. Thus, interference from the MOE is very important to ensure these buildings' environments suit children's needs with sufficient facilities. Conversely, central authorities should be flexible in some of their terms of approving these buildings, as perceived by the interviewees, because there is often no other choice other than renting these residential buildings, which would be difficult to modify according to all terms. Additionally, from the investigation of school building areas it appears that the schools could have the authority of adding a new class when children are promoted to an upper grade, and if there is an extra suitable and equipped room in an approved building. Also, in line with the Bandur's (2012) and Hammad's (2017) findings, school building maintenance should be the schools' authority. Additionally, this is evident in the existing literature which indicates that the authority of maintaining school buildings is the responsibility of school stakeholders. They have to ensure that the school building is safe for student learning (Thida & Joy, 2012). In contrast, consistent with the private schools document (MOE, 2006c), the findings indicate that class size should be determined by the Ministry. Otherwise, classrooms might be overcrowded as some school owners would like to recruit as many children as possible in each class, in order to receive extra fees, which helps them to reduce their expenses. In turn, this might negatively impact on student performance. Also, the literature suggests smaller classes might lead to better student output and would be less demanding for teachers. Studies of class size indicated positive and significant relationships between lower pupil to teacher ratios and student outcomes (Finn & Achilles, 1990; MacPhil-Wilcox & King, 1986; Wenglinsky, 1997). Thus, decisions to open new classes and new stage, organize classroom and maintain school building

could be devolved to schools authority, while school buildings and number of children in each class are essential to be approved centrally.

Curriculum and instruction

It is obvious from the data analysis that most interviewees felt most decisions relating to curriculum and instruction should be highly centralized. The authority of defining the school curriculum for all subjects should remain with the MOE. Yet, bilingual and global schools could be granted some flexibility to choose their own textbooks for subjects that are taught in English (Math, Science and English) in order to meet the community needs and student levels, but they should be according to the Ministry's criteria and subject to Ministry approval. Additionally, school teachers would like to share their experiences with the MOE, as the data revealed, in defining these English subjects. However, the findings showed that selecting national curriculum textbooks, including Arabic language, Islamic and Social studies, should be the MOE's authority. This finding is consistent with the results of other studies in Arab and Islamic countries, which revealed that the central authority should control the school curriculum (Al-Taneiji & McLeod, 2008; Jubran & Al-Shammari, 2011; Mansoor, 2004; Ziba, 2011). Thus, this consistency in these studies' results suggests that this findings could be generalized to similar Arab contexts. Conversely, inconsistent with this finding, Odden and Wohlstetter (1995) found that devolving curriculum authority to school stakeholders in schools was one of the factors that affects the success of implementing SBM. Similarly, several studies indicated school teachers' preference to be involved in decisions related to the curriculum and instruction (Abu-Shawish, 2016; Fung Wu & Tseng, 2005; Gemechu, 2014; Hammad, 2017; Wadesango, 2010). This is because they have the necessary knowledge, skills and experience with the subjects they teach (Abu- Shawish, 2016). On the other hand, if schools have a good administration headed by a qualified principal who is concerned about Islamic values and traditions, as well as the Omani environment, they could choose the textbooks of the national curricula according to the Ministry's criteria and subject to its approval, as seen by only three respondents (P5/BS39; PR10/BS31; PR27/BS34). Nonetheless, to avoid any contradiction between the different Islamic sects, it would be better for schools to implement the Ministry's textbook of the Islamic curriculum.

Moreover, interview analysis indicated that educational, religious, social and political reasons were behind centralizing the curriculum's decisions. These reasons are similar to the findings of Ziba's (2011) study, which indicated that the power of the curriculum should not be devolved to local level because it has "*political, cultural, linguistic, and national cohesion stakes*" (p.34). As noted previously, most of the Omani private

schools are managed by non-nationals. If this authority is transferred to them, they would probably teach a curriculum that is not suitable for the Omani environment, customs, traditions and Islamic culture, due to an unfamiliarity of these issues. Their decisions might conflict with the philosophy of Omani education. They might even stir up sectarian strife, as these schools have a diversity of students from different ethnic and religious communities, as mentioned in the context.

Furthermore, in order to preserve the mother tongue, as well as the national and Islamic identity, the current study, as evident from the data, found that the decision of whether or not to teach students, particularly Omanis, the national curriculum is the responsibility of the MOE. It showed that Islamic studies is obligatory to be taught for all Muslim students, either Arab or non-Arab students, but Social Studies could be optional for non-Omani students only. This curriculum could be translated into the English language and taught for those students who are weak in the Arabic language, as suggested by some of the interviewees. Besides, a possible explanation for these results may be that if such decisions will be conferred to the schools' authority, some of them, especially those which implement international curricular in English, might neglect teaching the national curriculum to give more focus to teaching the international curriculum, which could increase local resistance for both social and cultural reasons. Therefore, it can be assumed that the sensitivity of the Islamic culture is one of the limitations of devolving decision-making to Omani private schools authority, especially in the area of Islamic Studies curricula as it is known that Omani society is conservative to their national and religion identity.

In addition, the data revealed the decisions of choosing extra-curricular books, teaching methods and curriculum teaching plans could be devolved to the schools authority. Consistent with Abu-Shawish's (2016), Hammad's (2017) and Weiss's (1993) results, the interviewees of the current study perceived that teachers are closer to students, who will be affected by these decisions, than officials at the MOE (Walker, 2000; Murphy & Shiffman, 2002), and are the most aware of their learning abilities and needs, hence, they are more qualified to make these kinds of decisions. They can support the main curriculum with different activities from extra-curricular books, and may use the appropriate teaching techniques according to the level and ability of their students. Thus, this may improves students' achievement. They also should balance between the number of periods for teaching the national and international curriculum, according to centrally specified educational objectives. For example, as the data indicated, they may have the authority to define how many teaching periods are required to cover the objectives of teaching the Islamic curriculum, without restriction from the Ministry. Elliott (1994) indicates that since teachers are aware of their

children's needs, they can make the best decisions of choosing a suitable plan, materials, and learning activities for them. Also, these findings support Thida and Joy (2012), who found some of the central curriculum activities were not relevant to school children's needs. They indicated that flexibility should be provided for school teachers to select extra-curricular activities related to their students' best interests and needs. Likewise, these findings are parallel with Al- Taneiji and McLeod's (2008) findings, which revealed that teachers would be able to choose appropriate teaching styles and enrich the current school curriculum with extra activities if decision-making decentralization was implemented. Wößmann's (2003) study showed that students performed much better in Science and Math because teachers were granted the authority for teaching methods and curriculum selection. As noted previously, Omani private schools are different in types of curriculum followed. Thus, the particularity of each school should be considered, and particular attention should be paid to the amount of time teachers spend per subject.

In this respect with regard to the curriculum, an implication of these findings is that granting school staff and stakeholders the opportunity to share their input regarding developing the curriculum is vital, in order to be responsive to social and economic demands. Reports of the Omani educational system (Gonzalez et al., 2008; World Bank, 2012) indicate that there is a gap between educational outputs and higher education institutions, plus the capabilities and skills required in the Omani labour market. Additionally, the PIRLS's and TIMMS's results showed students' performance is below the international average in Reading, Mathematics and Science (PIRLS, 2012; TIMMS, 2015). It is evident that effort should be made to make adjustments in the curriculum and to remedy its inefficiencies. Schools as well as the private sector could be consulted in reforming the curricula. They could be asked what their ideas and expectations are in the new curriculum. Then, the MOE may reform the curriculum according to the local needs, with particular attention to preserving the local culture, and national and religious identity. This argument was supported by Thida and Joy (2012) who suggested that the curriculum should be clearly developed, and local teachers and administration should be permitted the flexibility to adjust the instructional materials and curriculum. Also, evidence from the literature shows that carrying out the responsibilities for the development and designing of the curriculum should be between local and central levels, but it should be based on the local-native requirements (Yazdi, 2013), as highlighted in the data. Some respondents revealed that there should be a decision-making partnership between the Ministry, the private sector and the local community on the curriculum (O8/BS36). Moreover, the researcher believes that the authority of selecting textbooks for English subjects, such as Math and Science, should

preferably be devolved to school teachers, because they are the closest to the students. They are more likely to know their characteristics and needs, and generally what is the best for them. This idea was supported by Gaziel (1998), who confirms that the school curriculum should be the choice of teachers, and based on learner's needs. However, the criteria or policy for choosing the curriculum should be made at the MOE, to ensure that schools would not select textbooks which contradict the country's cultural, religious and national identity, as well as student outcomes matching the requirements of higher education institutions and the Omani labour market.

6.8 Decision-making at school level

The authority of decision-making at school level was perceived by respondents as a partnership between the whole school community and its stakeholders. This section will focus on decision-making participants and how school decisions should be made, from which the study will identify the appropriate model of decision-making devolution at school level, and specify any requirements.

Who should participate in decision-making?

The interview analysis revealed that if the MOE transfers the decision-making authority to Omani private schools, this authority should be practised by school staff and stakeholders in a participatory process. This is dependent on the task and the nature of the work, the decision type and its relation to the person involved. This result is consistent with Somech (2002) who found that participating teachers in making decisions varies relying on the type of decision. Some interviewees indicated that if someone is a decision implementer, they should be involved in the decision-making process, in order this person would be more cooperative and committed to implementing the decision in a successful way and according to school's goals and objectives. Similarly, Goldman, Dunlap, and Conley (1993) found that teachers feel more responsibility towards the decisions they contribute towards making. Additionally, problems could occur if decision implementers are not involved or consulted. They might resist the decision, and in turn students may suffer. Wadesango (2010) states that imposing the curriculum without teacher involvement is often met with strong resistance from teachers, especially if it is irrelevant to students' needs. In the researcher's opinion, however, positive influence on decisions depends on the quality of the teaching and non-teaching staff that the private schools have. This thought is supported by the literature which claims that the school staff, especially classroom teachers, are more likely to be able to exercise influence over decisions if they are highly qualified (Rosen, 2007). It can be concluded that not all private school staff, as well as stakeholders, are qualified to make decisions, and their involvement is not

always positive to school level performance. Hence, those that are qualified should be involved in making decisions that relate to them.

Moreover, the findings show that the school principal should be key in making schools' technical and administrative decisions, and is the final decision maker of such decisions. The school principal could also have some input into financial decisions. This may be explained by the fact that the principal is the main person among school staff responsible for the implementation of these school's decisions, and other policies adopted in front of the Ministry. This finding is parallel to Cranston (2001) who indicated that the principal tended to have the final say over major school issues. Similarly, Ho (2006) found that principals were the key decision makers in three Asian educational systems; Hong Kong, Japan and Korea.

However, the principal is not an expert in all decision areas. The current study found that school principals should share responsibilities of the decision-making process with the whole school staff. Teaching staff, such as teachers, senior teachers and sections heads, are the most important school personnel who should be involved in the decision-making process, because they are influenced by most decisions made in the school and are the main actors in implementing these decisions (Wadesango, 2010). Sharing their knowledge with school leaders and other staff, and participating in the decision-making process, may help them to accept the decisions made, and thus, enhance cooperative commitment to achieve the school's goals. Teaching staff could be involved in decisions that are related to their fieldwork and expertise. Evidence from the literature indicates that teachers have an interest in participating in decisions areas located in their zone (Owens, 2003). Since the main task of the teaching staff is to implement the curriculum set for the teaching subjects, and they are the closest people to the students, they, as the data indicated, should participate in decisions of curriculum and instruction, as well as student affairs, such as choosing textbooks, setting exams and setting students' discipline standards. They may also participate in some decisions of school administrative matters, such as hiring teachers. These findings are in agreement with many researches' results. The findings of Fung Wu & Tseng (2005) recommended that Taiwanese teachers in all public and private schools, whether they are large, small or medium sized, should be allowed to participate in all decision areas, including those related to administration. Likewise, other studies indicated that teachers should be involved in decision-making areas that are relevant to their interests, including the curriculum and student discipline policy (Abu-Shawish, 2016; Al-Ghefeili, 2014; Al Kaabi, 2015; Hammad, 2017; Handler, 2010; Wadesango, 2010). Consequently, the decision-making process at private schools should be as a

partnership between the teaching staff and the principal, who is the key person in this process.

Furthermore, the results of this study show that school owners are key to making financial school decisions, such as defining the school staff's salaries and students' fees. They may have some input into other school issues, depending on their experience and education; otherwise, they could be informed in order to be familiar with their school's decisions. In reviewing the literature, there seems no evidence on the association of this finding. This needs to be studied further.

In addition, the data analysis revealed that the voice of school stakeholders, such as parents and students, should be heard, although some participants resisted parental involvement due to lack of experience in educational matters, lack of time to participate, and the personal interest of their children. The study found that parents, especially experienced and educated ones, could be consulted in some decisions concerning their children, such as behavioural and discipline problems, performance levels, homework, tuition fees, school uniform and health. They may share their experience in implementing school activities. However, the data did not provide any strong evidence of student involvement in the decision-making process. Schools may benefit from parents' and students' ideas about school timings and activities. These results are consistent with those of Al-Taneiji and McLeod's (2008) study, which suggested that parents could be involved in limited decisions relating to some student affairs, however they should be limited in their involvement of the decision-making process as active participants, unless they are educated, qualified and experienced. Also, their study indicated that students could also have a limited and defined role in some decisions. Similarly, Thida and Joy (2012) found that parents do not have an active role in the decision-making process, but are involved in some limited activities, such as opening school ceremonies, raising school funds, and participating in teacher-parent meetings, which is similar to the current parental involvement in Omani private schools. On the contrary, Di Gropello (2006) found that parents in community schools in Central American countries are involved in decisions related to teacher management.

Consequently, decision-making at school level was seen by the vast majority of the interviewees as a joint responsibility of the different school staff and stakeholders. Their involvement in the decision-making authority needs a specific decentralized strategy that enhances participatory decision-making at school level to be implemented, such as SBM, which is one of the most popular and significant approaches that has been adapted in decision making devolution at school level in various different countries.

Thus, SBM seems to be an effective approach that could be benefited from if the decision-making authority is devolved to Omani private schools. Also, the management of school-based decisions requires strong school leadership and a management structure that increases the quality of decisions in a participatory style. The following section will discuss this style.

Decision-making style

The data has indicated that different styles can be used to make decisions at school level, such as participatory, collaborative and consultative styles, depending on the participants' abilities and the type of issue discussed. This finding confirms the finding of Duke's (2005) study, which indicated that there is no specific style on how leaders successfully manage schools and facilitate the participation of school staff. Likewise, Sackney and Dibski (1994) found that principals used a collaborative decision-making style in carrying various activities within the SBM implementation. However, making effective decisions, as indicated by the respondents, should be based on agreement or consensus during the meetings, and in the form of partnership among different school staff and stakeholders, who should enjoy equal status. This finding is consistent with the finding of Bandur (2008), who found that a consensus was the dominate style in the school decision-making process. Participating school staff and stakeholders in the decision-making process may motivate them to give their comments and make proposals, which in turn may increase their satisfaction, self-esteem and feeling of security and support (Abu-Shawish, 2016). Their involvement can also improve their responsibility, accountability and commitment to the decisions made; hence, it may reduce their opposition (Yazdi, 2013). Thus, it can be concluded that participatory decision-making could be the most suitable style used in making decisions, because it may improve effectiveness of the decisions made. In line with this, there is evidence from Omani literature which indicates that participative decision-making is the preferred Omani decision-making style, since the country converted to Islam (Almoharby, 2010).

Moreover, this study found that there should be some type of participatory or group decision-making system that includes cooperation between school people and stakeholders. This needs to change schools' management structures from hierarchy and highly centralized management, to a more decentralized and participatory decision-making management. It can take the form of teams, committees or a school board, depending on the school size, as proposed by interviewees. The school staff recruitment team and disciplinary committee are examples mentioned by the respondents and which could be formed in schools. Different school administrators, teaching staff, and the principal or vice principal, could be members of such teams or

committees, depending on the decision type. Wadesango (2010) found that disciplinary committees were formed in secondary schools in Zimbabwe, consisting of the deputy head as leader, two senior teachers, and two staff members nominated by teachers. Additionally, a school board management or a board of directors, as perceived by several research respondents, could be formed, especially in the large and elite schools. Members of the school board should be elected from different school staff and local stakeholders. Some respondents voiced that the board could be headed by the school principal. However, the data indicated the principal should be the main decision-maker. In this regard, the principal, with the devolved power, should act as the key player to facilitate the decision-making process by encouraging and entertaining questions and contributions from other school board members (Oredein, 2010). This also requires the private schools to assign a well-trained and skilful principal in the school administration. School teams or committees should be regulated under the school board. Making decisions in groups allows all participants to propose their ideas, and accordingly decisions are made with their agreement (Owens, 2003; Vroom & Jago, 1988). This finding is in line with the finding of Gertler et al. (2007), who indicated that making school decisions in groups rather than individually increased higher quality decisions.

However, the views of the most interviewees seem more inclined towards forming a school board in each school. This is supported by Malen and Ogawa (1988) who suggest that the school board is more popular in shared decision-making. This finding has important implications for devolving decision-making authority to Omani private schools. The school board or council could be utilized as a model of decision-making devolution. According to Barrera et al. (2009) and Thida and Joy (2012), the school council is a blended model of the four models of SBM (see Section 3.4.4 in the literature). It acts as a school governing body, compromising of school staff and stakeholders, and could be adopted in schools because it enhances local collectively, participatory decision-making. It is more likely to make better quality decisions which are implemented effectively (Hammad, 2008), and also empowers its staff to have a greater power and authority to manage school affairs (Bandur, 2008; Beatriz et al., 2008; Barrera et al., 2009). Hence, it can be concluded that it is necessary to form a school board in each Omani private school in order to be granted decision-making authority, and thus decisions are made effectively with the agreement of its members, who should be from school teaching and non-teaching staff as well as parents.

Training

The result of the current study emphasized the importance and significance of training members involved in the decision-making process, as well as the rest of the school staff. Almost all the research participants insisted on school staff training, specifically principals, owners and teaching staff. If the decision-making authority is devolved to schools, as the data suggested, extensive courses, and continuous workshops in most decision areas should be provided, particularly in the decision-making process and methods, problem solving, leadership skills and team building and management. Training participants is important for the success of any change and improvement initiative (Fullan, 1993). Di Gropello (2006) indicates that training a school board is the key element of success of SBM implementation. These findings are consistent with many studies' findings, which recommended diversified on-going workshops and training for school leaders and teaching staff (Al- Ghafli & Al Humaidi, 2013; Al-Ghefeili, 2014; Keith, 2011; Oredein, 2010). Thida and Joy (2012) recommended that pre-service and in-service training should be conducted for school staff, especially principals. They should be prepared with the necessary skills and knowledge.

In line with the findings of previous research (Al-Ghefeili, 2014; Sumintono, 2010) the data analysis indicated that officials at central level also need training in order to construct a clear system in transforming the decision-making authority to school committees, which could lead to more positive outcomes. Consequently, this study recommends that training should be provided for both staff at central and school level, in case the decision-making authority is devolved to Omani private schools.

6.9 Requirements of decision-making devolution

The data analysis revealed that decentralizing the decision-making authority to local level demands some requirements. First, a Local Council of Private Schools (LCPS) should be formed, consisting of educated, qualified and experienced members who should be representatives from each type of private school, and from the MOE, preferably from the DGPS. The data indicated the various tasks of this council, concerning different private school issues, including the management of decision-making devolution, as viewed by some respondents, and it should act without any intervention from higher authorities. However, the researcher believes this council could act as a communication channel between the central level and schools. Its authority should not exceed the management of decision-making devolution, and it should act as a supporter for the implementation of devolving decision-making to school authority. Regulating other private education matters should be the job of a higher authority, otherwise, overlapping, duplication or contradiction in decision-making

might occur. For example, the council could have the responsibility of setting the criteria and control for devolving decision-making authority to school level. They could also clarify the school's autonomy over decision areas and accountability levels (De Grauwe, 2005).

Secondly, the findings of the current study indicated that the degree of transferring the decision-making authority to Omani private schools should be according to their results of evaluation and classification, which could be run by an external independent team, such as Ofsted, and under the supervision of the LCPS. The school evaluation provides an analysis of the school environment to determine the school's strengths and weaknesses (Cheng & Cheung, 2003). Technical and administrative evaluation should be run for each school, and accordingly they would be classified into groups - A, B, C and D. Based on the results of the classification, the council could specify over what decisions each private school should have power and responsibility.

Third, in order to confer private schools the power of decision-making, as perceived by the interviewees, they should meet certain criteria, which should be specified by the LCPS. These criteria could be a part of the private schools' evaluation. The interview analysis proposed certain criteria.

Finally, the findings suggested that if private school management is granted the power of decision-making, they should comply with the criteria or rules of devolution. They should be accountable for their decisions and could be held accountable if they misused this authority. Hence, they should know the accountability levels. This needs coordination from the MOE and the LCPS in order to establish an accountability system (De Grauwe, 2005). Decision areas should be withdrawn from the schools that would not commit to the criteria. Evidence from the literature indicates that imposing an accountability system has had a positive influence on almost all school matters (Piggot-Irvine, 2003).

These findings are in agreement with Theodorou (2006) who found that increased accountability and evaluation should be accompanied with granting school head teachers the flexibility of making financial decisions.

Consequently, these findings have important implications for transferring decision-making to Omani private school authority. This needs the central authority to establish a legislature enactment and clear regulations to implement this change (decision-making devolution). This thought is similar to what researchers have suggested (Bandur, 2011; Elmelegy, 2015; Thida & Joy, 2012).

6.10 Summary

This chapter has discussed the results of the current study based on the research questions and relevant knowledge in the literature review, related to the decision-making authority in private schools. The current decision-making authority of the private schools was still seen as highly centralized, and influenced by the governing system of the country, which has a top-down approach in nature, and a bureaucratic decision-making style. The key decisions are subject to the agreement of the MOE as the final decision maker. School involvement in the decision-making process is very limited. Thus, the private schools face barriers in decision-making including time-consuming, strict and tied rules, outdated and unsuitable bylaws, contradicting regulations, central interference, lack of support and resistance to change.

Moreover, it seems from reading the findings that Omani private schools should be conferred decision-making authority, but not be entirely, and only in certain areas. The gradual implementation of this reform is recommended. Furthermore, positive outcomes were identified by the interviewees if decision-making was to be devolved to school authority, such as improvements in school performance and student achievement, reducing decision-making times, increased flexibility, creativity, and increased democratic decision-making. In contrary, violating regulations and exploiting decision-making power were seen as the negative consequences of decision-making devolution.

The formation of a school board is another interesting and significant finding in order to decentralize decision-making to school authority. It could be used as a form or a model of decision-making decentralization. It should be composed of different groups of school members and stakeholders, including the principal, some teaching representatives, administrative staff, and some parents to whom the decision-making power and responsibility are decentralized. This board could have power over certain decentralized domains. Although the degree of devolution they can exercise differs from one domain to another, they should not be granted full control over each domain. They could have limited authority over decision areas related to the school building, as well as curriculum and instruction. Also, it can be assumed that the sensitivity of the Islamic culture is one of the limitations of devolving the authority of curriculum issues to these schools. In contrast, they could have greater power and responsibility over decision areas related to general administration, students affairs and school staff affairs. Also, some centralized areas, which are made at the MOE, could be shared with the school management team. Thus, absolute decentralization should not be recommended. There should be a balance between centralization and decentralization in certain aspects in order to make effective decisions.

Furthermore, the results of this study have indicated that respondents prefer a collegial, group decision-making style, where authority is shared among school management members through a democratic administrative structure, which includes participatory decision-making processes. Also, training should be provided in order to prepare the school management members for these new responsibilities.

Finally, the study suggested some requirements of implementing the reform of decision-making devolution. These include establishing a LCPS to manage this reform, evaluating and classifying private schools, defining criteria/terms of devolving decision-making, and setting an accountability system.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion, implications and recommendation

7.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter has five sections. The first briefly presents the main findings which directly answer the research questions. Then, the implications and recommendations of the study will be presented in detail. This will be followed by outlining the contributions and limitations of this study. Finally, before reporting on the personal reflection of the researcher on the thesis journey, some future research and studies will be described.

7.2 The main findings of this study

As shown through this study, there is a need to examine the area of decision-making authority in Omani private schools for the purpose of improving the functioning of decision-making. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with school staff and stakeholders, as well as officials from the MOE, to gather evidence to answer the following research questions.

1. What is the MOE's policy in making private schools' decisions, and to what extent this system is centralized or decentralized, and why?

2. From contextual and international perspectives, what are the effects, either positive or negative, of devolving decision-making to private schools' authority?

3. What are the areas in which the authority of decision-making could be devolved in private schools?

4. If decision making authority is devolved to Omani private schools, which model of school-based management is suitable and could be implemented, and how?

The findings have confirmed that the decision-making authority of private schools is highly centralized and affected by the country's traditional, hierarchical and bureaucratic governing system, which may constrain the devolution of decision-making. School staff involvement seemed to be fairly limited, leaving major decision-making to central management. As a result of this centralized system, private schools face various challenges in making key decisions, which may negatively affect school performance. On this basis, participants from school levels expressed their desire to play an active role in the decision-making process.

In addition, the respondents perceived potential positive and negative consequences of releasing decision-making authority to school level. Due to the various advantages of

implementing decentralized decision-making, as well as the different difficulties facing schools as a result of the current centralized system, the study called for granting private schools the authority of decision-making. However, this authority should be transferred gradually in specific areas, and according to certain criteria. Moreover, it seems that the sensitivity and defensiveness of the Islamic/Omani culture could limit devolving the decision-making power to school level, which represents more important limitations to the possibility of change. Accordingly, the study has shown that the degree of devolving decision-making authority should differ from one domain to another. Limited authority could be granted over decisions related to the school building and curriculum and instructions. Also, one of the most important findings is that the Islamic studies curriculum is highly sensitive and should be controlled by the central authority in order to maintain the national and Islamic identity, and to ensure that there is no contradiction between different cultures and Islamic sects. If this syllabus' issues are devolved to the schools authority, they might introduce some contents in the curricula that contradict the principles of Islamic values, customs and traditions.

On the other hand, greater autonomy could be devolved to the schools authority over the decisions relating to general administration, students affairs and school staff affairs. Also, the findings have revealed that some centralized areas could be shared between the MOE and private schools.

Furthermore, the participants confirmed that in order to devolve these decision areas to the schools' authority, a school board should be formed in each school to enhance participatory decision-making among its members, who should be from different school staff and stakeholders. School board members need to be prepared to implement the devolution of decision-making, and should, therefore, be educated and trained. Additionally, the study suggested some specific requirements of devolving decision-making to private schools, which will be discussed in the next section.

7.3 Implications and recommendations

This section is aimed at discussing the implications of the findings for the improvement of decision-making in Omani private schools and then followed by some recommendations. Since this study is the first of its type in examining decision-making authority, it might be helpful for policy makers in reforming the Omani educational system with regard to the decentralization of decision-making. The most significant finding of this research is the need for devolving decision-making in specific aspects to Omani private school authority. The study proposed some specific requirements to devolve this authority which can be considered as practical implications of the study. The implication of this finding will be discussed in the following five stages (legislative

framework and criteria of devolving decision making), followed by some recommendations.

Initially, in order to devolve decision-making to Omani private school authority, the most important step is for the central authority at the MOE headquarters to decide whether to introduce such a management change in these schools. Without this step, decision-making could not be devolved. This requires the establishment of a legislative framework with careful planning, as revealed from the data, through issuing a Ministerial decree, which may include the vision, aims and terms of the devolution, as well as a description of roles, rights, and responsibilities, for all who will be a part of the decision-making devolution reform. Then, the central level, represented by the DGPS, should establish the LPSC to manage and supervise this change through a well-defined framework. This council should be established with clearly defined roles and responsibilities in order to facilitate their tasks in decentralizing decision-making to private school authority. For example, ensuring each school's understanding and correct implementation of this authority should be one of the most important responsibilities of the council. Additionally, the council should specify the requirements and criteria of devolving the decision-making power, which the schools should fulfil. It may consult with the central authorities in the Ministry or from external authorities, for assistance in carrying out its work. Teams could be established within the council to facilitate its work. Thus, the council should design a documented implementation plan for devolving decision-making to private schools.

As the data indicated, this study suggests that it would better to include selected members from the central level and elected members from the various different types of private schools in this council. Besides, an experienced parent with an educational background could be a member of this council, as a parent representative. Establishing this council with representative members from both central and local levels is a vital step, and may reduce resistance from Ministry officials. Its members need to be familiar with their tasks and all issues concerning the devolution of the decision-making power, and its management. After being well-prepared, they could practice their tasks with support from the central level, but without direct intervention.

Furthermore, from the results of this study, it is recommended that private schools should fulfil certain requirements and criteria in order to be granted the decision-making authority, with the LPSC having the authority to determine them. Thus, the researcher suggests the following framework as a practical procedure or strategy to devolving decision-making authority to schools, which could be managed by the LPSC to

facilitate this task. The framework consists of five stages, as shown in the figure below, which will be discussed in detail, as follows.

Figure 8: The strategy of devolving decision making authority to Omani private schools

Source: The author of this study

Stage One: Education and Communication

First, before the implementation of devolution in making decisions, it is important to provide all of the different types of private schools with full information about this management change, in order to fully understand it and be aware of its requirements and criteria, as well as to reduce any resistance that might occur from the school staff or stakeholders (Boohene & Williams, 2012; Harvey, 2010; Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2013). This requires the LPSC to prepare and implement a plan to introduce this change, as shown in the following figure.

Figure 9: The elements of the first stage
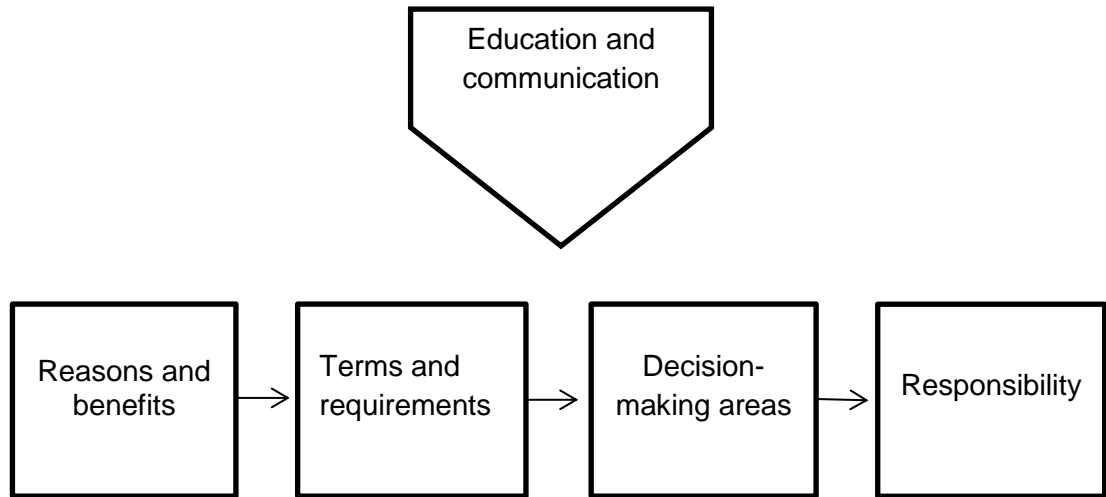
Source: The author of this study

It would be helpful that private school staff and stakeholders fully comprehend the reasons behind devolving the decision-making authority to school level (Gershberg, 1998), as well as the benefits that the schools would gain. Also, it is recommended that they need to understand the terms and requirements of obtaining this authority. Additionally, it is advised to aware of their authority in making decisions in different areas, and understand why they would not be granted decision-making power in specific areas. They need to be familiar with their responsibility for their decisions' outcomes, and they would be held accountable for misusing this authority. Circulating brochures, reports, publications and displaying presentations are important to educate schools about this reform. It is vital to organize face-to-face meetings with school staff and stakeholders in order to provide explanations and sufficient, valid and reliable information, as well as to exchange ideas and knowledge about any issues concerning the devolution of decision-making power. Hence, this interaction may reduce resistance, ambiguity and uncertainty of this change, and help to reach an agreement between both parties, especially if there is any traditional and cultural resistance. One of the decision-making constraints from the study was poor communication, and therefore the council should responsible for establishing a system of school stakeholders' feedback and involvement in developing this change and overcoming its implementation problems through direct communication channels.

Stage Two: Evaluation and Classification

This stage involves those schools that would like to implement the devolution of decision- making authority. The following figure shows the process of this stage.

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Figure 10: The process of the second stage

Evaluation

| Technical | Administrative | Standardized tests |

Classification

| Schools A | Schools B | Schools C | Schools D |

Decision-making

| The degree of autonomy devolved to schools | Decision-making areas |
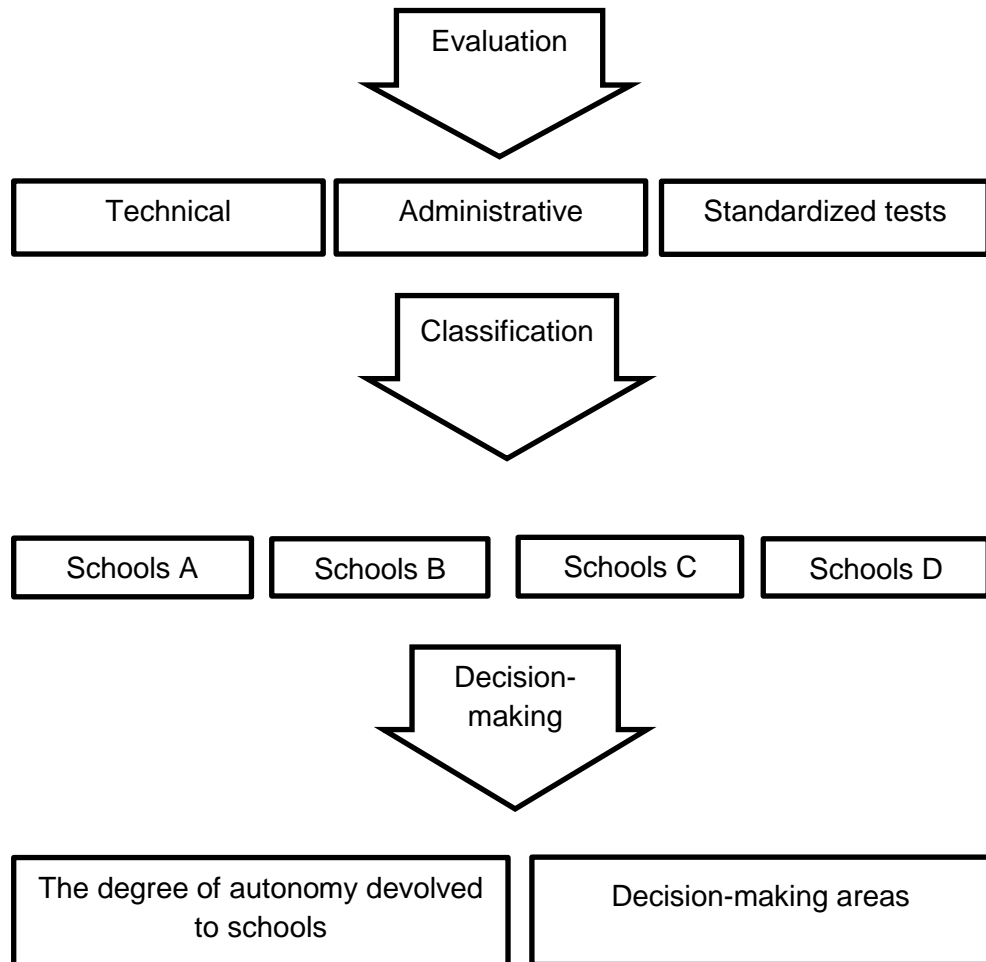
Source: The author of this study

Before devolving the decision-making authority to each school, continuous technical and administrative evaluation, as the data has indicated, should be carried out for private schools. They could be evaluated and assessed more than once per year in order to gain an idea of their levels, strengths and weaknesses, and hence weak schools will be encouraged to overcome their weaknesses and raise their performance levels. The schools should preferably be evaluated by a recognized external body which does not have any interests in the schools, such as Ofsted in the UK. Then, depending on the schools' final evaluation results, and whether or not they meet the criteria of the devolution of decision-making power, as well as their results of standardized tests, such as TIMMS, PIRLS and Grade 12, the council would classify the schools into three or four groups, A, B, C, and D. Accordingly, the degree of decision-making autonomy could be specified for each group. The council may identify decisions areas to be devolved for each group. Also, the devolved decision-making areas may differ from one school type to another.

Stage Three: Training

Before transferring the authority of decision-making to schools, they would need to form a school board with adequate qualified members, who would vary from one school to another, depending on the size of the school. However, it should be comprised of administrators, teaching staff and at least one parent, and maybe a student from a secondary school. Those members, to whom the decision-making power and responsibility would be decentralized, would need to fully understand their power and responsibilities, and acquire the necessary essential skills. Not only this, but most importantly, they need to be aware of the country's culture, tradition and laws, besides the terms and conditions relevant to education in general themselves (Gamage & Zajda, 2009). Thus, training programs should be carried out by specialized and experienced trainers for all school board members with follow-up support, assistance and guidance from the central authority, in order for them to be well-prepared and skilful, which in turn may increase the success of the change implementation (Fullan, 1993; Di Gropello, 2006). A comprehensive training plan should be designed by the council according to members' needs of the school board, as well as other school staff including teamwork, problem-solving and decision-making techniques, executed through different workshops, courses and exchange visits to other schools. The figure below clarifies the suggested training plan.

Figure 11: The training plan
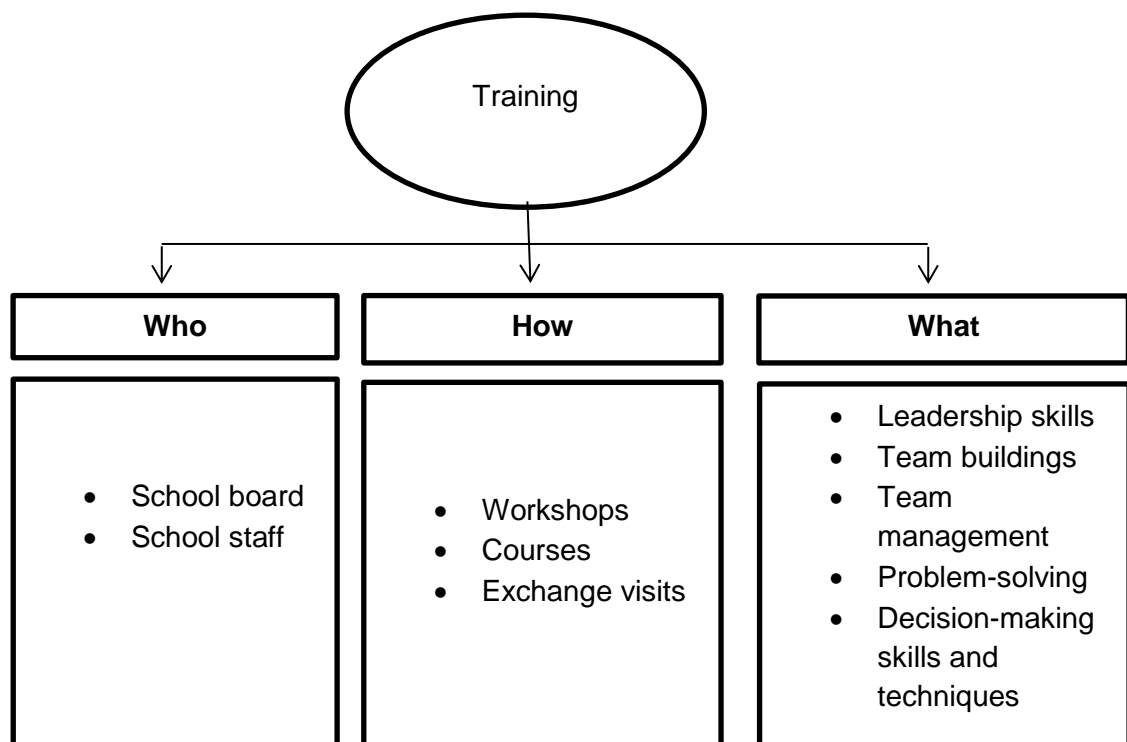
Source: The author of this study

Stage Four: Implementation

As previously noted, devolving decision-making to the authority of schools differs from one school to another, depending on which group they are classified in. During this stage the qualified and trained school board of each school would be officially granted the power of decision-making in specific areas. School decisions should be made in the form of partnerships with an agreement of the school board's members. Also, the school board could devolve decision-making authority to school teams, such as a school staff recruitment team and a disciplinary committee. The figure below shows the people who could be granted the decision-making authority at school level.

Figure 12: Making decisions at school level
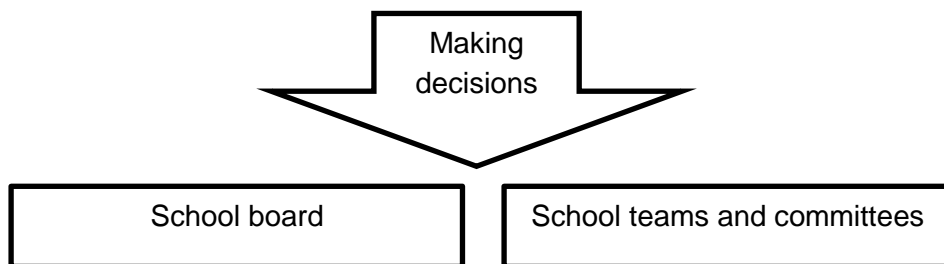
Source: The author of this study

Stage Five: Monitoring

Finally, the schools should be continuously followed up, during the implementation of the devolution of decision-making authority, to ensure their commitment to the authority granted and decisions, particularly in technical aspects, are made properly and effectively. The MOE staff can regularly check the schools' work. If a school abuses the power, it should be held accountable and accordingly, power over decision areas might be withdrawn. This needs to be from the LPSC with the MOE's coordination to establish an accountability system. In contrast, committed schools could be rewarded and granted more decision-making authority, especially if schools show improvement on their performance. The following figure summarizes the results of this stage.

Figure 13: The results of the monitoring stage
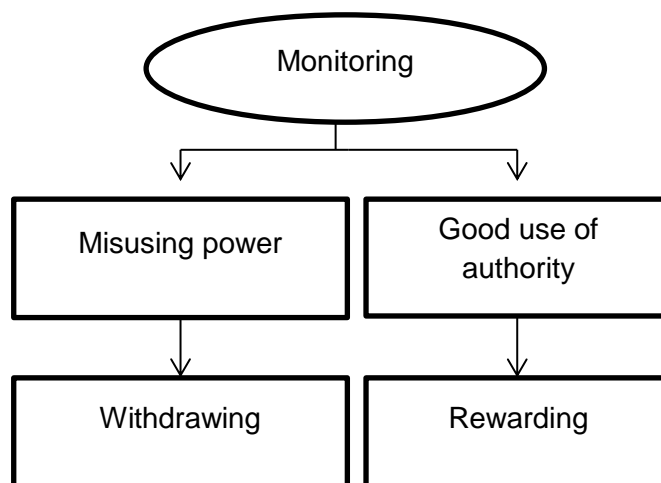
Because this stage involves evaluating the effectiveness of decision-making, reasons for misusing power should be investigated. If this can easily be overcome, the strategy of devolving the decision-making authority can carry on again, starting from Stage Three, especially if these schools need more training. If schools are not be able to overcome their problems, and continue to misuse their power, they should be excluded from being granted any further decision-making authority.

The implementation of this strategy needs time and effort besides careful and full planning. Piloting is vital in order to be assessed and evaluated for continuous improvements and overcoming any challenges and risks, as well as to make any changes according to the schools' needs. Additionally, opportunities should be given to school boards to reflect upon their needs and problems for improving the strategy.

In addition, based on the findings of this research, the researcher provides the following recommendations:

Recommendations for the MOE

1. The results revealed that schools were not involved in the decision-making process in key areas. Thus, it is strongly recommended that the MOE should empower schools by giving them the opportunity to participate in the process of any decision-making. They should be consulted and their views should be heard in order to know whether central decisions are fair and acceptable to the schools. The Ministry should benefit from their expertise in all decision areas. This needs more communication channels with school staff and stakeholders. The role and level of school participation in the decision-making process needs

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to be made very clear. Hence, this involvement may increase the level of support from the school and their commitment to implement decisions, as well as minimize any resistance.

2. The findings revealed that miscommunication and inadequate Ministry staff members, were important factors in decision-making delays. Hence, it is important that the MOE should recruit sufficient, experienced and trained employees, who can also preferably understand English. Also, all correspondence and circulars to schools should be in two languages, both Arabic and English.

3. The results of the research have indicated resistance to change from the Ministry officials, as well as school stakeholders. Thus, it is vital for the MOE to introduce any educational reform in general, and the decentralization of decision-making in particular, to all education stakeholders through social media, leaflets and educational portals, television programmes and newsletters. Not only this, but the MOE needs feedback from local level and to consider their needs in introducing any reform, such as reforming school curriculum, which could help to reduce their opposition and increase the success of the change. Thus, the implementation of such reform needs careful planning and to be culturally accepted. It needs time and preparation to be introduced to all stakeholders at central and school level. Short, medium and long-term targets should be considered.

4. The study has shown evidence that private schools face difficulties in finishing the procedures of recruiting teachers on time due to the multiplicity of authorities. Thus, it is vital that there should be representatives from all authorities in one station, preferably located in the building of the MOE, where the schools can finish their recruitment procedures in a timely manner.

5. The study has confirmed that schools have encountered a problem in appointing teachers because of the different regulations from two central authorities; the MOE and the MOMP. Hence, the Education and Labor bylaw for educational institutions should be issued by the Council of Education, in order to overcome this problem.

6. The implementation of the reform of decision-making devolution cannot be adopted without the conviction and approval of senior officials in the MOE, which requires to establish a legislative basis that grants private schools authority for making their decisions within a centrally determined framework of

goals, policies, priorities, standards and accountabilities. This framework should be documented and made accessible to school stakeholders, and those in charge. It ought to contain a practical guideline of the implementation of this change.

7. For successful implementation of the devolution of decision-making, necessary training and follow-up support and assistance should be provided for all implementers, especially the school community, in order to acquire the new knowledge and make effective decisions.

8. Regarding the decision-making areas, the study suggests that schools could have the power to make decisions in most areas related to students and staff affairs, and school general administration. In contrast, the central authority should preferably control the areas that pose a danger to the safety of students, such as some areas related to the school building, plus the areas that negatively might affect Omani and Islamic culture, which are specifically related to defining and teaching the national curriculum, especially the Islamic studies. Additionally, the decision of student tuition fees should remain with the central authority in order to avoid greedy owners from increasing them to an amount that would be difficult to pay for some parents. Nonetheless, the MOE should consult schools in making decisions in such areas. On the other hand, some domains could be decided by both parties.

9. The study confirmed that decisions areas could be devolved according to certain criteria and requirements. They should not be decentralized to the authority of schools that have significant irregularities, as they might not comply with central polices, bylaws and regulations.

10. It is recommended that schools should be monitored and followed-up on the implementation of the decision-making devolution indirectly. This requires the MOE, represented by LPSC, to establish an accountability system.

11. It is advised that before determining whether to devolve decision-making authority to private schools, such reform would preferably be piloted in some private schools, and then be assessed and evaluated in order to tackle its challenges and risks.

Recommendations for private schools

1. Each private school should establish a mandatory school board comprising of voting and non-voting qualified members, depending on the school size and

number of students. The school board should be made up of the school owner, principal, and representatives of teaching staff and parents, as well as a representative for students in secondary schools. This board should be established according to the specific guidelines set out by the LPSC.

2. The school board should understand their roles, power, responsibilities and accountability.

3. The chairperson of the school board should play the role of facilitator, rather than a key decision maker. They should encourage participatory decision-making partnership among the school board's members, and create a collaborative culture in the school. Besides, consulting school staff, as decision implementers, and hearing their voice is recommended. In turn, this may overcome any resistance and increase the quality of decisions made and school effectiveness, as well as increase transparency and accountability in decision-making.

7.4 Contribution of the research

As previously claimed, there are no current studies that directly address the authority of decision-making in Omani private schools. In the Omani context, such an issue is treated with reservation because of two reasons. First, the word 'authority' in Oman is generally understood as being related to politics, and thus, giving opinions on such issues is considered too sensitive to be expressed publicly. Another explanation could be related to the traditional nature of Islamic and Omani culture. As a conservative Muslim society, Omanis respect their religion and cultural privacy. Making any changes in the national curriculum, for example, might negatively affect other cultural aspects. Also, the changes might stir up sectarian strife between the country's Islamic sects - Ibadism, Sunnism and Shiaism, which the Omani government does not allow. Therefore, criticising such issues is considered as a matter of high sensitivity. Thus, this study is considered the first of its type to examine the authority of decision-making in private schools in Oman. It is making a significant contribution to very limited existing research on decentralizing decision-making authority in the Omani education system in general, and private schooling in particular. By answering the research questions, it adds to the knowledge of the nature of the decision-making authority in Omani private schools. The findings offer a practical strategy for policy makers on how to devolve decision-making authority in these schools. Besides, the study provides implications and recommendations to improve decision-making in Omani private schools.

Internationally and theoretically, this study may also contribute to the existing knowledge about decision-making devolution. The current literature provides

insufficient understanding of the unique Omani context and culture regarding decision-making decentralization, thus this study filled a gap in the literature by exploring challenges and potentials of devolving decision-making authority to Omani private schools. The research found that there are specific decision-making areas that could be devolved from the central authority to private schools, and others that could not be devolved. Also, it is evident that the country's national, cultural and Islamic identities, as well as traditional and bureaucratic power structure in governing system are important elements influencing on decision-making devolution, particularly the national curricula for Islamic education studies, which can be considered as a unique contribution to the literature. Additionally, while most previous studies focused on exploring decision-making authority in public schools, and from the perceptions of either central level or school level, this study has investigated this reform in private schools, and from the perceptions of both levels.

7.5 Limitations of the study

There is no perfect study in any field of research, and this study has some limitations. The first concerns the scope of application. It would have been beneficial if the study had been conducted in governorates other than the Muscat governorate. However, compared with other governorates, Muscat is the largest governorate in Oman, and has the highest population density and number of private schools. It has all types of private schooling, unlike the other governorates, which include only one to two types. However, its results are not necessarily true of the remaining private schools in the other governorates. Also, as this study is limited to private schools, which differ to public schools, there should be caution of the generalization of its findings on public schools. Additionally, the findings are not recommended to be generalized to schools in other Gulf and Arab countries, because the context of these countries is not similar to Oman.

Furthermore, from a methodological perspective, this study may be criticized by the usage of only interviews as a method of collecting data. It would have beneficial if the study had used triangulation to strengthen the findings, or additional qualitative methods, to complement each other, which in turn may increase the reliability and validity.

Another limitation of the study is the possible influence of the researcher's subjectivity in collecting and analysing the data, which is similar to all kinds of qualitative studies. The researcher's position at the MOE, and as an insider researcher, might have influenced some of the interviewees from being completely honest with him. In contrast, most of the respondents expressed their gratitude to the researcher for

providing them such an opportunity to listen to their perceptions and experiences. Also, misinterpreting or mislabelling the interviews might emerge from the findings. However, in order to minimize the researcher's bias and to increase credibility, interviewees were informed that the researcher's role was totally different than his position at the MOE, and their anonymity was confirmed. Additionally, the thematic analysis of the researcher was compared with two of his colleagues in order to increase the validity of the results. Unfortunately, it was difficult to send transcriptions back to the interviewees to check for accuracy and to add their comments, due to the limited time available and the resources at the disposal of the researcher. However, he tried his best to be transparent in transcribing, interpreting and labelling the interviews.

Despite these limitations, the researcher believes that his study has generated rich data, which has contributed to the knowledge on decentralizing decision-making authority to private schools. Having considered that, a number of areas for future research are recommended in the following section.

7.6 Further research and studies

Based on the findings and limitations of the study, some future studies that could be considered include the following. The study focused on private schools in the Muscat governorate, and used the qualitative analysis to explore the views of education stakeholders from both central and school levels. Thus, a replication of this study is recommended in another Omani governorates using the quantitative approach, which may cover wider range of population, and verify or support the study findings or identify other aspects of divergence and convergence regarding decision-making devolution. Additionally, another replication of this study is recommended to explore different school stakeholders' perceptions, such as students, which may verify the findings of this study or reveal different and interesting findings that this study has not addressed. Hence, the findings may provide more generalizable statements about the topic of the study, which may be generalized to other Omani settings or neighboring countries.

Moreover, the study suggested a strategy of devolving decision-making authority to Omani private schools, future research can investigate internal and external school stakeholders' perceptions about the effectiveness of this strategy after its implementation, as well as its impacts on the quality of education in general and on the quality of decision-making in particular, using a quantitative approach, such as surveys, to cover wider range of participants.

In addition, this study found that the current staff appointments of Omani private schools is controlled from multi-authorities in the country, such as the MOE, MOMP and ROP, which has affected negatively the process of decision-making. Because this

study did not examine the views of the MOMP and RPO, further research is vital to explore their perception on how to overcome the delay in completing the recruitment procedures and the possibility of conferring the authority of school staff recruitment to private schools. The research can be carried out by interviewing officials from the two authorities or distributing questionnaires to them.

7.7 Personal reflection

This long journey of the thesis has been a learning and challenging experience for the researcher, with a mixture of frustration, anxiety, enjoyment and satisfaction. Conducting this PhD research has been an invaluable learning experience. The researcher has understood the stages of designing and conducting qualitative research, such as deciding on the research topic, collecting and analysing the data, and interpreting the results. The researcher's interest in the thesis topic, and his beliefs about its importance and contribution to the knowledge, have helped him to be committed to complete the work enthusiastically, although he has had feelings of stress and anxiety.

In addition, going through the stages of this research, the researcher learned various research skills and strategies, such as critical reading and writing, time-management, problem-solving and decision-making. Also, the researcher learned about different cultures, including the British culture, through interactions with British people and other international research students.

Moreover, undertaking this study was not an easy process for a novice researcher. Many difficult situations were encountered living abroad without his family. Additionally, the requirements of the study caused him much stress, anxiety, uncertainty and confusion. However, these feelings were overcome with the great support from his family, supervisor and colleagues. Besides, he spent happy and delightful times through the interaction with other students and peers who helped in reducing the study pressure. In turn, this helped him to gain the confidence to finish the research on time.

Finally, this study has made the researcher more aware of the real situation in private schools in general, and the nature of decision-making authority in particular. It has also aided him with understanding the importance of hearing the voice of school staff and stakeholders regarding the decision-making process. Hopefully, the researcher is planning to publish his research findings and present them at local and international conferences, as well as conducting any future research needed in education.

7.8 Summary

This concluding chapter has presented a summary of the key research findings in the light of the research questions. It has also offered future implications and recommendations of the study's findings, and highlighted its contributions and limitations. Various potential study areas were also identified for further investigation. Finally, the chapter described the researcher's reflection on the journey of the study.

Moreover, it can be concluded that in exploring the authority of decision-making in Omani private schools, the study called for decentralizing decision-making to the Omani private schools authority. Although such educational reform is important to keep up with the requirements of a global trend, it is also important to ensure that any change should serve the needs of Omani society, as well as the marketplace. Not only this, but also important is that this change should be fit the nature of the Omani context and its national, cultural and religious identities, which play a significant role in accepting the implementation of this change or resisting some of its elements, as it is evident from the findings of the decision-making areas.

Furthermore, this conclusion chapter has provided a practical strategy to devolve decision-making power from the central authority to private schools, which can be considered as the most significant and important contribution of this study. However, much effort is needed, both at central and local levels, if this reform is to be successfully implemented in Omani private schools. Additionally, the researcher needs to play a significant role in persuading the higher authority, depending on the results of this study.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Ministry of Education organisational structure
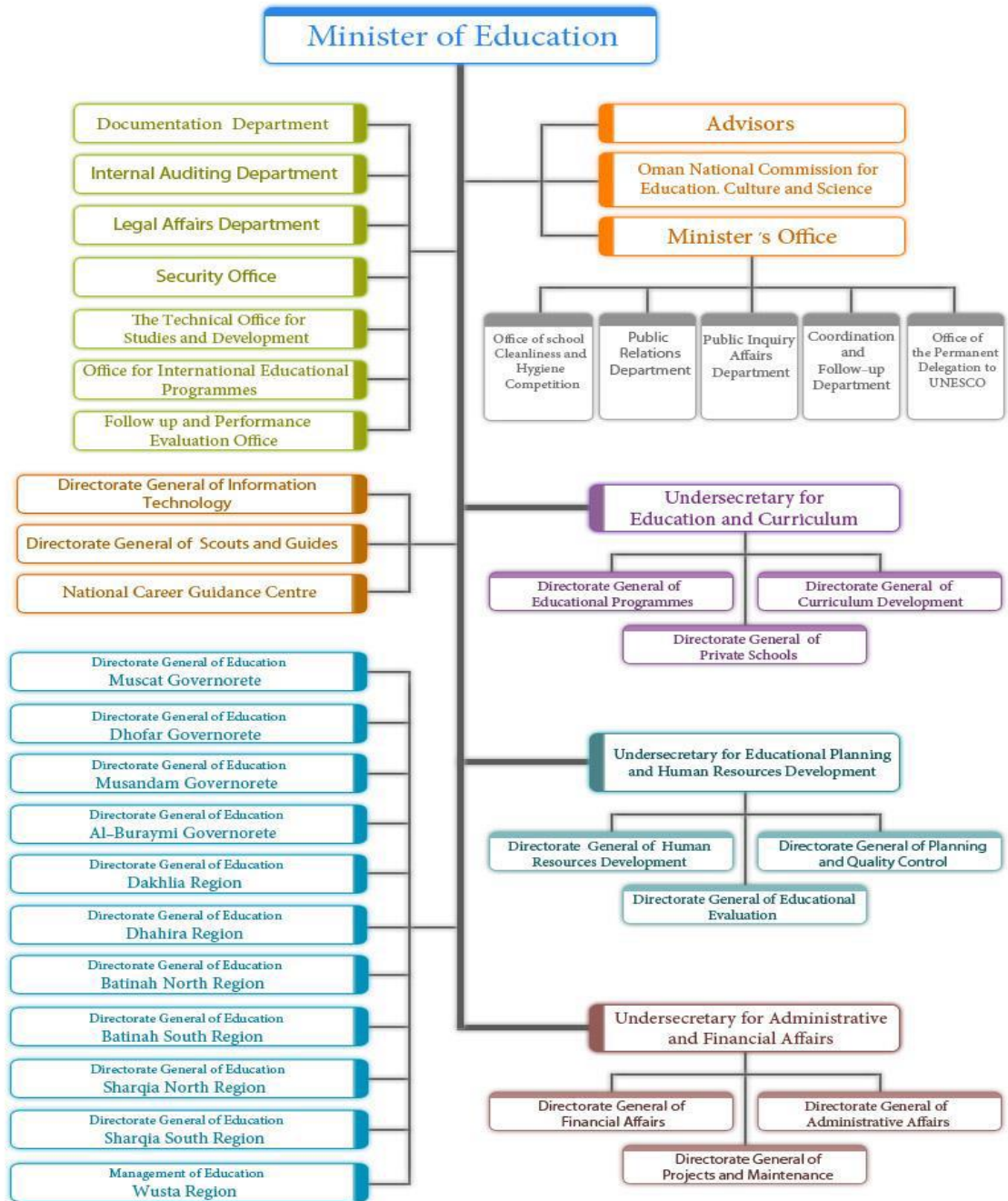
www.moe.gov.om

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview schedule

Research questions	Themes/ categories	Main interview questions	Group 1 School staff and stakeholders				Group 2
			Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	Ministry people
1. What are the different views regarding the process of making the private schools' decisions according to the current MOE system or regulations?	a. The views about private schools' decisions- making processes according to the MOE system or regulations.	What is your opinion about the current MOE system in making private schools' decisions?	✓	✓	✓	✓	What is the role of the private schools administration in decision-making process?
	b. The degree of the authority conferred to the private schools in making their decisions. ·	To what extent do you participate in decision- making process?	✓	✓	✓	✓	To what extent do private schools participate in their decision-making process?
		Is authority of decision-making conferred to private schools enough?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
		Who makes the final approval of the private school's decisions? (examples)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	c. The difficulties in making private schools' decisions	What are the biggest constraints that you face in making school's decisions according to this system?	✓ ✓ ✓	What are the biggest constraints that private schools management face in making school's decisions according to this system?	What are the biggest constraints that private schools management face in making school's decisions according to this system?
2. What are the effects, either positive or negative, of devolving decision-making to private schools authority?	The consequences of devolving decision-making to private schools authority	On the basis of your experience, what do you think are the positive outcomes of devolving decision-making to private schools authority?	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓
		On the basis of your experience, what do you think are the negative outcomes of devolving decision-making to private schools authority?	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓
3. What are the areas in which the authority of decision-making could be	The domains of	In your opinion, what are the areas that should be conferred to the private schools	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓

decentralized in private schools?	decision- making	authority in decision- making? And why?				
		In your opinion, what are the areas that should not be conferred to the private schools authority in decision- making? And why?	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓
4. Which model of decentralized decision-making is suitable and could be implemented if decision making authority will be devolved to Omani private schools?	The appropriate model of the school-based management approach in making the private schools' decisions.	If decision- making is devolved to school authority: - Who should have this authority over private schools? and why?	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓
		-How can they be involved in this authority?	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓
		Do they require any training? If so, what kind of training?	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓

Appendix 3: The piloting stage

The stage of Piloting interviews

The piloting stage was conducted at the end of March and in the beginning of April 2016. The main purpose of piloting is to gain experience of how to conducting interviews as well as to test the clarity of the schedule and to provide feedback.

Aims

The stage of piloting targeted at:
- Exploring if there are any difficulties in accessing or communicating with the MOE, schools and the participants.
- Investigating if there are any obstacles in conducting the semi-structured interviews.
- Checking if the respondents understand and able to answer the interview questions.
- Checking if the data gathered can meet the research questions.
- Refining the interview questions.

Therefore, confusing, misleading, sensitive or unreliable questions were changed, restated or eliminated in order to obtain reliable and valid data (Gray, 2014; Wellington, 2015).

Participants of the piloting stage

The semi-structured interview schedule was piloted on several respondents who are different than the ones interviewed in the main study. Some heads of sections from the DGPS were chosen as the MOE's representatives in the study. Some owners, principals, teachers and parents from different kinds of private schools were also included in the piloting stage. Non-random purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants who consented to involve in the interviews.

Procedures

In order to conduct the piloting, the researcher travelled to Oman. First, an approval letter was granted to him from the MOE; the Technical Office of Studies and Development plus the DGPS, as a permission to carry out his piloting study in the private schools. Then, he met the participants, either in the MOE or in the private schools, to explain to them the aims of the study and to get their permissions and appointments to conduct the interviews with them. Additionally, the information page of the study and the consent form were delivered to each participant. Finally, the researcher abled to cover 16 private schools and to conduct 23 semi-structured interviews as follows:

- Table 12: Number of the pilot study's participants from the two groups:

Name of the group	participants
The MOE people	4
The private schools stakeholders	19
Total	23

- Table 13: Number of the pilot study's schools and participants by school type:

The school type	Schools	Participants
Quran schools	3	5
Kindergarten schools	2	3
Monolingual schools	4	4
Bilingual schools	6	6
Global schools	1	1
Total	16	19

- Table 14: Number of the pilot study's participants according to their positions in the schools:

Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents
3	11	2	3

Observations, difficulties and implications

The researcher found that the stage of piloting has been very useful in several ways. He managed successfully to conduct good number of interviews in a short period of time. This might be because of the easy access he gained and his familiarity as he was working in the DGPS, the MOE; plus the good relationship he has with the ministry officials. Thus, there were no real problems encountered, just few difficulties. In addition, the piloting stage empowered the researcher and helped to fine tune his techniques (Wellington, 2015). There were some observations and implications regarding the piloting process and the interview schedule as follows:

- Most of the schools were cooperative with the researcher and most of the participants were willing to support and happy to be interviewed. However, it was hard to obtain

appointments with quiet few participants, especially teachers, in some schools, like the global ones, due to preparing their students for term exams. This was considered when conducting the main study which was carried out before and after the exam period plus holidays were avoided. Additionally, it was difficult to conduct interviews with parents as most of them were busy with their jobs in the morning and families in the afternoon. Nonetheless, the researcher encountered similar problem in conducting the main study. Some appointments with some school's members were rearranged, and some of them with parents were cancelled.

- Setting with participants before interviewing was very important in order to explain the purposes of the study and to build good rapport with them.

- Some participants preferred not to be recorded on a tape and the researcher had to take notes, which was difficult for him to concentrate and might affect the reliability and validity of the data. Thus, both of recording types were used in the main study. The interviewee chose the one that is convenient to him/ her.

- Most of interviewees preferred to be interviewed in Arabic language rather than English; hence, the interview language was considered as an option in the main study, particularly for those participants who have difficulty in using English language. Using comprehensible language and relevant to participants creates trust between interviewer and interviewees. They can speak freely and openly, and provide in-depth data, which in turn enhances reliability and validity of the data. However, it might affect the validity of the data when mistranslation or misinterpretation occurs (Keats, 2000).

- The researcher phoned several times the schools in order to know their location and to confirm appointments with participants. He used his own car to approach the schools. Therefore, this cost the researcher much of money, time and effort.

- The interview schedule was not fit for all participants although the data gathered revealed that participants have answered most of the questions. Some questions have been restated, merged and divided into two questions. Thus, the interview schedule was developed to fit to all participants and to make easier for the researcher to determine the questions of each aim of the research; and hence, it assisted him in analysing the data. For example, some main interview questions related to the first aims of the research have been restated to be easily understood by the participants (see Appendix 7).

- The researcher realized that some participants are unfamiliar with the MOE regulations in monitoring private schooling as they are new employees in private schools. This impacted on their responses. They could not answer some questions. Thus, working

experience in Omani private schools plus having enough knowledge about the ministry regulations were considered in choosing the research participants in the main study.

- It was very important to give examples when asking some questions to participants in order to understand them and to be more specific. Hence, using examples according to the position of each participant was considered in asking the interview's questions of the main study. In such cases, the researcher was caution from leading questions.

- The researcher tried his best to conduct the interviews in a quiet location, but unfortunately there was background noise and interruptions in some schools. This was considered when conducting the main study.

- Some respondents went off talking on irrelevant issues that is not related to the research topic when answering some questions. This was considered when carrying out the main study by bringing the interviewers back and keeping the interview on track.

- Transcription took up a lot of time. Thus, this was considered when doing the analysis of the main data by transcribing the most important parts that is relevant to the research topic, and which answer the research questions. This way of transcribing process was a little bit faster without influencing on the validity of the data. Additionally, the researcher could use tape player which has foot pedals to facilitate the transcription. He could use his feet to play, stop and rewind a tap during typing or writing the transcript (Gibson & Brown, 2009). Nonetheless, the researcher did not use this kind of tap player in transcribing the main data. He found easier to play the recorded data by using his computer.

The process of analysing data

Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collection of the piloting stage, using inductive approach. The following procedure was used to analyse the interviewing data (Bryman, 2015; Harding, 2013):

- First, some tape recorded interviews were transcribed in the same language used in interviewing the participants.

- Then, each transcription was read line by line and reviewed more than once. Other interviews, that were not transcribed, were listened more than twice.

- After that, important, common and relevant information was explored and coded manually, from both hand-written notes and tap recorded interviews, according to the research aims and questions.

- Next, the data was written in tables under specific categorization.

- Then, a comparison between respondents was made. Repetition, similarities and differences between respondents were identified and grouped together according to the aims and the questions of the research.
- After that, the relationship between patterns were established.
- Finally, themes from the findings were identified. (attached)

Preliminary findings

The major findings from the data collecting can be presented in four categories. Each category has different themes. A brief description of the findings can be explained in the following:

1. **The authority of the decision-making conferred to the private schools according to the MOE system**:

- All the respondents viewed that the main private schools' decisions are centralized and there is always delaying in the process. The school administration has to get from the MOE the final approval for their decisions. However, few of respondents revealed that the ministry sometimes takes in its consideration the recommendation of the school when making some schools' decisions.
- Most of the respondents expressed unhappiness for the authority conferred from the MOE in making their school's decisions. They mentioned that it is inadequate and more autonomy should be given to the schools.
- All the respondents from the school level, except one, regarded that the MOE system and officials hinder them in making schools' decisions. Limited flexibility and autonomy, delaying in making decisions, difficulty to make improvements and financial cost are the most responses regarding the biggest constraints that the Omani private schools encounter from the MOE system.

2. **The effects of devolving decision- making to the private schools authority:**

- The majority of the participants responded that it is important to devolve decision-making from the ministry to the private schools authority for the following positive outcomes:
  - School administration will have greater flexibility in making decisions such as hiring and firing staff.
  - Schools will have more autonomy to provide the educational needs of the local parents.
  - Decision making will be faster.
  - School administration will have more confidence in decision-making.
  - Schools will save time, effort and cost.

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- Schools management will have more freedom in school planning and developing.
- Schools will have more democracy in decision-making.

- Few of the participants stated some negative outcomes of decision-making devolution such as taking the advantage of this power to make wrong, unfair or unjust decisions.

3. The areas of decision-making:

- Responses differed from one participant to another on the areas in which the private schools should or should not have full autonomy. This disparity could be due to the different positions that each participant occupies.

- The most suggested areas in which Omani private schools should have greater autonomy are: hiring and firing teaching staff, choosing science, math and English curriculum, organizing cultural or entertainment activities, school fees, organizing school building, students admission criteria and setting students discipline standards.

- However, few of the participants have stated some areas in which Omani private schools should not have full autonomy. These areas including: dismissing students and choosing different national curriculum for Islamic and Social studies.

4. Decision-making authority at school level:

- There has been a discrepancy regarding who actually has the authority of making schools' decisions.

- The majority of the participants suggested that all school stakeholders, such as owners, principal, teachers and parents, should participate in decision-making.

- Most of the participants revealed that decisions should be made unanimously. They suggested that decisions could be made by different teams depends on the sort of decisions.

- Some of the respondents indicated that school board, including owners, principal, teachers and parents, could be formed in big schools. It might make decisions regarding school's future plans and vision.

- Some of the ministry people suggested that a representative from the MOE should be a member in the school board.

Conclusion:

The piloting stage has been very helpful for the following reasons. First, it is useful for the researcher to explore the kind of difficulties that he might encounter in accessing or communicating with the MOE, schools and the participants and in collecting or analysing the data. Hence, he has to take these difficulties into his consideration when carrying out the study.

In addition, he able to test the clarity of the questions and to make some improvements in the interview schedule. Besides, he managed to get some results from which he could check if they answer the research questions. Finally, the researcher found that some participants resist devolving decision- making authority to different private school stakeholders. Thus, change management in education and how to overcome resistance to change should be explored.

Themes from preliminary findings

1. **The authority of the decision-making conferred to the private schools according to the MOE system**

   a. The process of the MOE system in making private schools' decisions:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers
1	-Unsatisfied -Take a lot of time - Centralized -Totally top-down	-Centralized	- Centralized
2	-Centralized - authoritarian	-The system is unclear	- Centralized
3	-Very rigid -Old system - Highly centralized	- Centralized	
4		- Centralized	
5		- Centralized	
6		- Centralized	
7		- Centralized	
8		- Centralized	
9		- Centralized	
10		- Centralized	
11		- Centralized	

   b. The final approval of the private schools' decision:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers
1	-The MOE	-The MOE	-The MOE
2	-The MOE	-The MOE with the recommendation from the principal	-The MOE
3	-The MOE	-The MOE	
4		-The MOE	
5		-The MOE	
6		-The MOE	
7		-The MOE	
8		-The MOE	
9		-The MOE	
10		-The MOE	
11		-The MOE	

   c. The authority of decision- making vested to private schools:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers
1	We do have choices to do some decisions	Not enough	Little
2	- unhappy - inadequate	There is a room for decision- making	happy
3	No flexibility or support from the MOE	We are happy	

4		Schools should have more flexibility in making some schools' decisions	
5		The school participates with the MOE in some decisions	
6		Inadequate	
7		unhappy	
8		- unhappy - inadequate	
9		Little	
10		Adequate	
11		happy	

d. The biggest constraints:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers
1	- limit our authority - delaying in making decisions - critical situations	- delaying in making decisions	- no flexibility
2	-The MOE interfering in our financial issues - limited flexibility and autonomy	- there are some difficulties, but I am able to work through them by building good relationships.	- no flexibility
3	-no flexibility	- delaying in making decisions	
4		- cost the school a lot of money - delaying in making decisions - no flexibility	

5		-No difficulties	
6		-overlapping in supervising	
7		- delaying in making decisions - inequality in making decisions - no flexibility - overlapping in supervising and jurisdictions - cost the school a lot of money - hinder some operations in the school	
8		-cost the school a lot of money -delaying in making decisions -influence on students' achievements	
9		- effects on teaching and learning processes in the school - cost the school a lot of money	
10		-difficulty to make improvements in the schools - no flexibility	
11		No difficulties	

e. The importance of decision- making devolution:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	MOE
1	-very important	- important	Important	Important	Important with following- up
2	- important	I cannot give you my opinion	Important	Important	Important with following- up
3	-of course, it is very important	- important		Important but not all decisions	Important with following- up
4		-certainly			Important with following- up
5		Yes			
6		Not clear			
7		very necessarily			
8		Important			
9		Important with supervision			
10		Not total devolution			
11		Not encouraging			

f. The positive outcomes of decision- making devolution:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	MOE
1	More flexibility	Not mentioned	Provide the educational needs of the local parents	Schools will have more autonomy to provide our needs in educating our children	-School administration will have more confidence in decision- making -Save time , effort and cost - schools will be more responsible in front of local community - Refining and improving the services provided to students
2	More flexibility	-Provide education for my students - able to carry out my decisions and to overcome difficulties -school's principal has the ownership and accountability of his decisions - More autonomy and flexibility	Not mentioned	-Provide better educational programs for children - provide better educational services - diversify better educational resources -develop students' performance	-save time, especially in routine things - Reduce the burden - freedom in choosing suitable curriculum according to students' needs

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Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	MOE
		-schools will have better repetition - control over decision- making			
8		-school administration will have more freedom and power in planning			
9		-Freedom in making decisions according to the MOE regulations - allow the schools to plan effectively.			
10		More flexibility and autonomy in decision-making			
11		More flexibility and autonomy in some decision-making			

g. The negative outcomes of decision- making devolution:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	MOE
1	They might be implement different things against the goals of the MOE	Not mentioned	-owners might make decisions according to their personal passions	Schools might take the advantage of this authority to make unfair decisions	Not mentioned
2	Not mentioned	Not mentioned, but we are not ready to be decentralized	Not mentioned	Schools might take the advantage of this authority to make unfair decisions if it is not devolved correctly	Not mentioned
3	Not mentioned	Not mentioned			Schools might take the advantage of this authority to make wrong decisions
4		It might be chaos if there will be total devolution			Schools might take the advantage of this authority to make decisions against

3	More flexibility	Not mentioned		Not mentioned	-decision making will be faster - Save time and effort
4		More freedom to deal with parents and teachers			-Save time and effort -reduce the depression - schools will have greater flexibility in decision-making
5		-More freedom and flexibility to plan and develop the school - More democracy and innovation			
6		More flexibility			
7		-More flexibility and autonomy - decision making will be faster - better planning			

					the ministry's guidelines
5		Depends on the leader			
6		Might affects negatively if the owner takes his own decisions			
7		Owners of private schools may take advantage of this power to make unfair and unjust decisions			
8		Some weak people do not use the power properly			
9		Not mentioned			
10		Not total devolution			
11		Not total devolution			

h. The areas of decision- making:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	MOE
1	-Hiring teachers -Organizing classroom and RLC -Choosing science, math and English curriculum - School uniform	-Choosing science, math and English curriculum -Hiring teachers -Schools building according to the ministry's specifications	Choosing curriculum and teaching plan- organizing classroom	-Students' admission age -Choosing curriculum - Hiring teachers	Hiring and firing teachers according to the ministry's specifications
2	-Choosing science, math and English curriculum according to the MOE's minimum requirements - Hiring and firing teachers -Schools fees -Schools building according to the ministry's specifications	-Students admission age -Choosing science, math and English curriculum - Hiring teachers	-Choosing curriculum -Organizing classroom	-Hiring teachers- setting discipline standards	-Choosing educational program -Organizing cultural or entertainment activities according to the ministry's specifications -Choosing science, math and English
					curriculum and extra curricula according to the ministry's criteria
3	Hiring teaching staff -schools building according to the ministry's specifications -choosing science, math and English curriculum	-Organizing cultural or entertainment activities -Firing teachers -Ppreparing kg curriculum -Organizing classroom		-Choosing curriculum - Hiring teachers	Hiring and firing teachers according to the ministry's criteria
4		Students admission age -Choosing science, math and English curriculum - Hiring and firing teachers -Organizing classroom			Setting students discipline standards -Student suspend -Organizing cultural or entertainment activities according to the

					ministry's specifications
5		Preparing Quran curriculum according to the ministry's criteria plus the building - Hiring and firing teachers			
6		All centralized			
7		Hiring and firing teachers or workers -School building according to specifications - Staff's salaries			
8		Hiring and firing teachers- school building according to specifications -Organizing cultural or entertainment -Schools hours			
9		-Organizing cultural or entertainment events- salaries – school fees			
10		-School fees -Number of periods for each subject - Hiring teaching staff -Students' admission age -Choosing curriculum			
11		Not mentioned			

- School fees ✓✓✓✓
- Hiring and firing teaching staff ✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓
- Students' admission age ✓✓✓✓
- Curriculum (math+ science+ English) ✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓
- Cultural or entertainment events ✓✓✓✓✓
- Students discipline standards ✓✓✓
- Organizing school building ✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓

i. People that participate in making decisions in schools:

Participants	Owners	Principals	Teachers	Parents	MOE
1	Owner+ principal + some teachers	Better to form school board including school owner, principal and a teacher . -Different teams should be formed -School staff can participate in making decisions depends on the sort of the decision	-Depends on the kind of the decision. -Teachers and parents can participate with principal in decision-making -Decisions should be made unanimously.	Decisions should be made unanimously from school board which includes Owner+ principal + some teachers+ parents.	-Better to form school board including school owner, principal, teachers, parents and representative from the MOE . - Decisions should be made unanimously

#					
2	Owner+ principal + some teachers+ parents, but it depends on the kind of the decision. -Financial issues should be only with owners - teams should be formed	School superintendent or chairman of the school board	Owner+ principal + some teachers+ parents,	Better to form school board including school principal, teachers, parents and representative from the MOE .	-School board including school owner, principal, teachers and representative from the MOE participate in making decisions which should be made unanimously.
3	-Depends on the kind of the decision: the operating issues should be decided by the school board which includes owners and principals. Technical issues	-Depends on the kind of the decision. -Teachers and parents can participate with principal in decision-making - Decisions should be made unanimously.		Teachers and parents can participate with principal in decision-making - Decisions should be made unanimously.	-School board including school owner, principal and teachers participate in making decisions which should be made
	can be decided by school principal and subject coordinator.				unanimously.
4		-Depends on the kind of the decision. -Financial issues should be only with owner -Teachers and parents can participate with principal in decision-making - Decisions should be made unanimously			Different teams, including teaching and non-teaching members, can be formed to make decisions, depends on the kind of each decision.
5		Owner+ principal + some teachers+ parents -School board can be formed			
6		Decisions should be made unanimously from school board which includes Owner+ principal + some teachers+ parents.			
7		Better to form school board			

		including school owner, principal and some teachers			
8		-Depends on the kind of the decision. -Financial issues should be only with owner -Teachers and parents can participate with principal in decision-making - Decisions should be made unanimously - Different teams should be formed plus school board			
9		-Different teams should be formed plus school board, depends on the kind of decisions -Owner+ principal + some teachers+ parents can participate in decision- making			
10		-Different teams should be			

		formed plus school board, depends on the kind of decisions -Owner+ principal + some teachers+ parents can participate in decision- making			
11		School owner			

Appendix 4: Semi-structured interview questions

No.	Research questions	Guiding interview questions
1	What are the different views regarding the process of making the private schools' decisions according to the current MOE system or regulations?	What is your opinion about the current MOE system in making private schools' decisions?
		To what extent is the authority of decision-making conferred to private schools?
		How satisfied are you with the process of private schools' decision-making according to the MOE system?
		Do you face any difficulties from the MOE in making your school's decisions? If yes, what are the biggest constraints?
2	What are the effects, either positive or negative, of devolving decision-making to private schools authority?	How important/ effective is to devolve decision-making from the ministry to the private schools authority?
		What do you think are the positive or the negative outcomes of devolving decision-making to private schools authority?
3	What are the areas in which the authority of decision-making could be decentralized in private schools?	According to your opinion, what are the areas in which the private schools should or should not have full autonomy in decision making? And why?
4	Which model of decentralized decision-making is suitable and could be implemented if decision making authority will be devolved to Omani private schools?	If decision- making is devolved to school authority: - Who should have this authority over private schools? and why? - Do they have enough experience or appropriate skills and knowledge to make good decisions? - How can they be involved in this authority?

Appendix 5: The approval letter from the Technical Office of Studies and Development at the MOE

الرقم : ١٦٠٥٧٣٠٩

سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التربية والتعليم

الدائرة : المكتب الفني للدراسات والتطوير

الرقم المسلسل: ١

من:

الاسم: المكتب الفني للدراسات والتطوير

تاريخ الإرسال: ١٧/٠٣/٢٠١٦ ١٢:٣١:٣٥ PM

إلى: المديرية العامة للمدارس الخاصة

نسخة للاطلاع إلى: د . صالح بن أحمد بن سلطان الحبسي

الموضوع: تسهيل مهمة الباحثة محمود العبري

الملفات الملحقة:

participant information sheet and consent form.pdf

semi-structured interview questions.pdf

أسئلة المقابلة- شبه مقننة .pdf

معلومات عن مشروع البحث و استمارة الموافقة للمشارك .pdf

المرسل: غانم بن جمعة بن صالح الحسني

محتوى المراسلة:

السلام عليكم ورحمة الله وبركاته،،،

الموضوع: – تسهيل مهمة باحث

نود إفادتكم بأن الباحث محمود بن محمد العبري، يقوم بإجراء دراسة حول (تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة في سلطنة عمان) ويرغب المذكور في تطبيق أداة الدراسة وهي عبارة عن مقابلة شبه مقننة على عينة من موظفي المديرية العامة للمدارس الخاصة (المدير العام – المدير العام المساعد – مدير دائرة – رئيس قسم) وعينة من موظفي المدارس الخاصة في محافظة مسقط (مالك المدرسة – مدير المدرسة – مساعد المدير – رئيس قسم / مادة – معلم أول – معلم – ولي أمر) التابعين لمديريتكم.

عليه المرجو التكرم بتسهيل مهمة الفريق في تطبيق أداة الدراسة وذلك وفق الإجراءات المعمول بها لديكم، وفي حالة وجود أي استفسار يمكن للمعنيين لديكم الاتصال بالبا- مباشرة على هاتف رقم (٩٩٣٣٣٩٧١)

شاكرين لكم حسن تعاونكم.

وتفضلوا بقبول فائق التقدير والاحترام .

سعاد بنت مبارك بن سعيد الفورية

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Appendix 6: The official letter from the DGPS to the private schools

سلطنة عُمان
وزارة التربية والتعليم
المديرية العامة للمدارس الخاصة
مكتب المديرة العامة

الفاضل / مدير مدرسة   المحترم

تحية طيبة . . . . . .وبعد:

الموضوع/ تسهيل مهمة باحث

بالإشارة إلى الموضوع أعلاه، نود إفادتكم بأن الفاضل/ محمود بن محمد بن حارث العبري يقوم بدراسة ميدانية تحت عنوان " تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة في سلطنة عمان " وذلك استكمالا لمتطلبات نيل درجة الدكتوراه في التربية من جامعة يورك بالمملكة المتحدة . ويرغب المذكور في تطبيق أداة الدراسة ومقابلة بعض المسؤولين من المدارس الخاصة (مالك المدرسة– مدير المدرسة– مساعد مدير المدرسة– رئيس قسم/مادة– معلم أول/ معلم– ولي أمر) وذلك للتعرف أو للاطلاع على آراء ووجهات نظر مختلفة عن تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة في سلطنة عمان بهدف تحسين عملية صنع القرار في هذه المدارس . وبناء على نتائج الدراسة سيتم وضع مقترح لتطبيق نموذج مناسب من نماذج الإدارة الذاتية باعتبارها شكلا من أشكال اللامركزية في اتخاذ القرارات المدرسية والتي ينتج عنها تطوير في مختلف الجوانب بالمدرسة، ويتم تنظيم هذا البحث من قبل الباحث نفسه و تحت إشراف الدكتور John Issit من قسم التربية بجامعة يورك بالمملكة المتحدة.

عليه يرجى التكرم بتسهيل مهمة الباحث في تطبيق أداة الدراسة في مدرستكم، ولمزيد من الاستفسار يرجى التواصل مع الباحث سواء على البريد الالكتروني alabri@moe.om او رقم الهاتف (99333971) .

شاكرا لكم سلفا حسن تعاونكم،،،
وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الإحترام،،،

فاطمة بنت عبدالعباس نوراني
المديرة العامة للمدارس الخاصة

Appendix 7: The participant information sheet with consent form in English

THE UNIVERSITY _of York_

Department of Education
Heslington, York, YO10 5DD
Tel: (01904) 323460
Web: http://www.york.ac.uk/education

Information Page
Research project: Devolving decision-making in private schools in the Sultanate of Oman

Dear Participant,

I am a PhD student in Education at York University, United Kingdom. At present, I am carrying out a research project to explore different perspectives on devolving decision-making authority in Omani private schools for the purpose to improve the decision-making in these schools, on the basis of which I will put forward a decentralized model of school based management designed to result in improvements in schools. This research is being organised by myself under the supervision of Dr John Issit in the Department of Education at University of York.

I am writing to ask if you are able to take part in the study. Please take time to read the following information to help you decide if you wish to take part. If you have any questions, please get in touch.

What are the purposes of the research?

The purposes of the project are:

1- Investigating the views about private schools' decisions-making processes according to the current MOE system or regulations and whether or not private schools management face constraints and difficulties in making the schools' decisions within this system.

2- Exploring if there is a need to devolve decision-making authority from the central to school level or not and identifying the expected outcomes of such change.

3- Examining the areas in which the authority of decision-making could be devolved to school level.

4- Proposing a convenient model or strategy of school-based decision-making to be applied if the authority of decision-making will be devolved to Omani private schools for certain aspects.

What would this mean for you, as a participant, and for me, as a researcher?

You will be providing me with information through an interview in which you will be asked about your personal experiences, opinions and ideas of devolving decision-making in the private schools. With your permission, I will audiotape the interview so that I have a good record of what you have said. This interview may take around 30- 40 minutes, and will take place in your workplace, at a time convenient to you. The information gathered will

be very important to my research and hopefully for improvement of decision-making in private schools.

Anonymity

The data you provide will be stored by code number and will be anonymised two weeks after data collection. Any information that identifies you will be stored separately from the data.

Storing and using your data

The anonymous data will be archived and stored in secure locked room and/or on a password protected computer. It may be used for future analysis and shared for research or training purposes, but participants will not be identified individually. If you do not want your data to be included in any information shared as a result of this research, please do not sign the consent form.

During the recording process, if you would like to say something that you don't feel comfortable for me to record, please signal and I will switch off the recorder and switch it back on again later when you think it is fine to continue recording.

Your involvement in the study is absolutely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time during data collection and up to two weeks after the data are collected.

Information about confidentiality

The data I collect (audio recordings and transcripts) may be used in *anonymous* format in different ways: reports, presentations and journal articles.
I hope that you will agree to take part. If you have any questions about the project that you would like to ask before giving consent or after the data collection, please feel free to contact Mahmood Al Abri by email (mmaa509@york.ac.uk) or by telephone on 99333971, or the Chair of Ethics Committee via email education-research-administrator@york.ac.uk
If you are happy to participate, please complete the form attached.
Please keep this information sheet for your own records.
Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Yours sincerely,
Mahmood Al Abri
PhD Student
University of York, Education Department

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of the Research: Devolving decision-making in private schools in the Sultanate of Oman

Name of Researcher: Mahmood Al Abri

Please initial each box if you are happy to take part in this research.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information given to me about the above named research project and I understand that this will involve me taking part as described above. ☐

I understand that the purpose of the research is to explore decision-making authority in Omani private schools and to introduce a proposal of an appropriate model of school based management as a form of decentralization which results in school improvements according to this study's findings. ☐

I understand that I will be providing information through an interview in which I will be asked about my personal experiences, opinions and ideas of devolving decision-making in the private schools. I realise that this interview may take around 30- 40 minutes. ☐

I understand that I may withdraw my agreement to participate at any time during the data collection or for up to two weeks afterwards. Within that time, I know that I may indicate whether or not the data collected up to that point can be used in the study, and that any information I do not want used will be destroyed immediately. ☐

I understand that the interview will be audio recorded, and this recording may later be transcribed. I understand that these data will be handled in a manner which ensures that only the researcher can identify me as his source. ☐

I understand the data will be stored securely in a locked room or on a password protected computer and only the researcher (Mahmood Al Abri). I understand that my identity will be protected by use of a code/pseudonym. ☐

I understand that I am being offered confidentiality in any written report, publication or oral presentation which draws upon data from this research study, and that none of my comments, opinions, or responses will be attributed to me. I understand that my workplace will not be identifiable in any written report. ☐

I understand that the data will be anonymised two weeks after data collection. I understand the data will be archived and could be used for future analysis or other purposes. ☐

Signature _____   Date _____

Appendix 8: The participant information sheet with consent form in Arabic

THE UNIVERSITY *of York*

المحترمين   الأفاضل / المشاركين في الدراسة

يقوم الباحث حاليا بدراسة ميدانية تحت عنوان " **تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة في سلطنة عمان** " وذلك استكمالا لمتطلبات نيل درجة الدكتوراه في التربية من جامعة يورك بالمملكة المتحدة.

سوف تتيح الدراسة استطلاع آراء ووجهات نظر مختلفة في موضوع تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة في سلطنة عمان وذلك بهدف تحسين عملية اتخاذ القرار في هذه المدارس، وسيتم وضع أو اقتراح نموذج مناسب من نماذج الإدارة الذاتية باعتبارها شكلا من أشكال اللامركزية في اتخاذ القرارات المدرسية التي تسهم في تطوير مختلف الجوانب في المدرسة وذلك بناء على نتائج الدراسة، ويتم تنظيم هذا البحث من قبل الباحث نفسه و تحت إشراف الدكتور John Issit من قسم التربية بجامعة يورك بالمملكة المتحدة.

ويعد هذا الخطاب طلبا لموافقتكم في المشاركة في هذه الدراسة. كما نأمل منكم التفضل بقراءة المعلومات أو البيانات المرفقة لمساعدتكم على تحديد موافقتكم في المشاركة. وفي حالة رغبتكم في المشاركة يرجى التكرم بتعبئة الاستمارة المرفقة.

آملاً منكم التكرم بالمشاركة، وإذا كان لديكم أي أسئلة يرجى التواصل مع الباحث (محمود العبري) على البريد الإلكتروني (mmaa509@york.ac.uk) او رقم الهاتف (99333971)، أو التواصل مع مسؤول أخلاقيات البحث العلمي بجامعة يورك على البريد الإلكتروني (education-research-administrator@york.ac.uk) .

شاكرا لكم سلفا حسن تعاونكم،،،،
وتفضلوا بقبول فائق الإحترام،،،،

محمود بن محمد بن حارث العبري
طالب دكتوراه بجامعة يورك بالمملكة المتحدة

ملخص أو بيانات عن موضوع الدراسة

مشروع الدراسة : تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة في سلطنة عمان

ما أهداف الدراسة؟

تبحث الدراسة أوجه وكيفية تحسين عملية اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة بسلطنة عمان، وسيتم وضع مقترح لتطبيق نموذج مناسب من نماذج الإدارة الذاتية باعتبارها شكلا من أشكال اللامركزية في اتخاذ القرارات المدرسية وذلك بناء على نتائج الدراسة. و يمكن إجمال أهداف الدراسة في النقاط التالية:

1- استطلاع الآراء ووجهات النظر بشأن عملية اتخاذ قرارات المدارس الخاصة وفقا لنظام أو لوائح وزارة التربية والتعليم، و بيان إذا كان إدارة هذه المدارس يواجهون معوقات أو صعوبات في اتخاذ قرارات المدرسة حسب هذا النظام. ومن خلال هذا الهدف سيتم تحديد مدى الاستقلالية الممنوحة للمدارس الخاصة في اتخاذ قراراتها حسب نظام الوزارة.

2- تحديد النتائج المترتبة من عملية تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار للمدارس الخاصة سواء كانت ايجابية أم سلبية.

3- تحديد المجالات التي ينبغي أو لا ينبغي أن يكون للمدارس الخاصة الاستقلالية الكاملة في اتخاذ القرار بشأنها و الأسباب الكامنة وراء الايجاب أو السلب، وذلك من خلال استطلاع آراء المسؤولين في وزارة التربية والتعليم وإدارات المدارس الخاصة.

4- اقتراح نموذج مناسب من نماذج الإدارة الذاتية التي يمكن تطبيقه في المدارس الخاصة في تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار، الذي من خلاله يتم تحديد الاشخاص الذين لديهم المصلحة للمشاركة في اتخاذ القرارات المدرسية.

ما هو المطلوب من المشاركين ومن الباحث في اجراء هذه الدراسة؟

سيقوم الباحث بإجراء مقابلات مع المشاركين في مكان عملهم وفي الأوقات المناسبة لهم للتعرف على تجاربهم الشخصية وآرائهم بهدف الحصول على بيانات وأفكار مهمة جدا لمشروع الدراسة، والمأمول منها في تحسين عملية اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة . وسيتم تسجيل المقابلة في شريط صوتي وذلك بموافقة المشارك بحيث يكون لدى الباحث سجلا جيدا في ما يقوله المشارك . وستستغرق هذه المقابلة قرابة 30 إلى 40 دقيقة.

سرية البيانات وكيفية استخدامها وتخزينها

سيتم استخدام وتحليل البيانات والمعلومات التي جمعت من المشاركين لأغراض البحث العلمي فقط من قبل الباحث نفسه، وسوف يتم التعامل معها بسرية تامة من دون الإشارة لأسماء أو صفات المشاركين، وستحفظ باستخدام رموز معينة في غرفة مقفلة آمنة أو على جهاز كمبيوتر محمي بكلمة مرور. كما أنه يمكن الاحتفاظ بهذه البيانات على أن تكون مجهولة المصدر لاستخدامها لأغراض التحليل والبحث أو التدريب في المستقبل، ولكنه لن يتم التعرف على أسماء المشاركين أوصفاتهم. وفي حالة عدم رغبة المشاركين بتضمين بياناتهم وتبادلها من خلال نتائج هذا البحث، يرجى عدم التوقيع على استمارة الموافقة المرفقة. علما بأن المشاركة اختيارية ومن الممكن انسحاب أي مشارك في أي وقت يرغب فيه بذلك أثناء إجراء المقابلة ولمدة أسبوعين من تاريخ المقابلة.

استمارة موافقة المشارك

مشروع الدراسة : تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة في سلطنة عمان

أسم الباحث: محمود العبري

يرجى الإشارة بعلامة (✔) على كل مربع إذا كنت ترغب للمشاركة في هذا البحث.

- أؤكد أنني قد قرأت واستوعبت المعلومات المعطاة لي عن مشروع الدراسة المذكور أعلاه و كذلك أنني على دراية بأن هذا سيتطلب مني المشاركة على النحو المبين أعلاه☐

- أفهم بأن الغرض من هذا البحث هو استطلاع الآراء بشأن سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة في سلطنة عمان وتقديم مقترح لتطبيق نموذج مناسب من نماذج الإدارة الذاتية باعتبارها شكلا من أشكال اللامركزية في اتخاذ القرارات المدرسية وذلك بناء على نتائج الدراسة ☐

- أتفهم تماما بأنني سوف أقوم بتزويد الباحث بالبيانات والمعلومات من خلال المقابلة التي سأسأل عن تجاربي الشخصية وآرائي وأفكاري عن تفويض سلطة اتخاذ القرار في المدارس الخاصة . وأنا أدرك بأن هذه المقابلة قد تستغرق نحو 30 إلى 40 دقيقة ☐

- أتفهم تماما بأنه يمكنني سحب موافقتي عن المشاركة في أي وقت خلال المقابلة و جمع البيانات وإلى مدة أقصاها أسبوعان بعد تاريخ المقابلة. وخلال هذه المدة، أعلم بأنه يمكنني السماح للباحث باستخدام المعلومات و البيانات التي تم جمعها أثناء المقابلة في الدراسة أو عدمه، وأن أي معلومات أو بيانات لا أرغب باستخدامها في الدراسة سيتم التخلص منها فورا ☐

- أفهم بأن المقابلة سيتم تسجيلها على شريط صوتي، وأن هذا التسجيل سوف يمكن أن يدون في نسخة مكتوبة لاحقاً . كما أنني على دراية تامة بأن هذه البيانات سيتم التعامل معها بطريقة تضمن بأن الباحث فقط يمكن أن يتعرف علي كمصدر له ☐

- أتفهم بأنه سوف يتم تخزين البيانات بشكل آمن في غرفة مقفلة آمنة أو في جهاز كمبيوتر محمي بكلمة مرور، و الباحث (محمود العبري) فقط لديه وسيلة الوصول إلى أي بيانات تعريفية. كما أتفهم بأن هويتي سوف تكون محمية باستخدام رمز أو اسم مستعار ☐

- أفهم بأن هويتي ستكون سرية من دون الإشارة إلى اسمي أو صفتي في أي تقرير مكتوب أو نشر أو عرض شفوي التي تستمد البيانات من هذه الدراسة ، كما أن أي تعليق أو رأي بدر مني لن يشير إلى شخصيتي . كما أتفهم بأنه لن يتم الإشارة باسم مكان عملي و التعرف عليه في أي تقرير مكتوب ☐

- أتفهم بأن البيانات ستكون مجهولة المصدر بعد أسبوعين من جمعها. كما أتفهم بأنه سيتم أرشفة البيانات واستخدامها لأغراض التحليل أو غيرها في المستقبل ☐

التوقيع_____   التاريخ_____

Appendix 9: Examples of transcriptions with initial analysis

02/BS32

1   **Researcher**: First of all I would like to thank you for your time to participate with me in a
2   discussion about the private schools authority in making decisions according to the MOE system.
3   Before the discussion I would like to give me your experience in the private schools. How long
4   have you been working in Omani private schools.
5   **Interviewee**: First of all thank you very much for coming and talking to me regarding these and I
6   feel very obliged that my opinion will help you to present your papers. Now it's been almost I
7   came in Oman in 1985. Initially in 1987/1988 two years I worked in private schools and then I
8   joined the Moe for few years, and in 1996 I quit from the ministry and started with the private
9   schools. It is a beautiful country and education is free which gives a lot of opportunity to make
10 a difference in every child life. The people in the MOE are very nice, very cooperative, but we
11 have certain issue which has to be rectify. For example, when we want to take any decision,
12 normally we send them paper for approval. It takes very, very long. I personally feel sometimes
13 they don't work on a team. They work individually, and that the reason getting answer or
14 feedback from the MOE takes very, very long, which hampers us.   Like for example, there are
15 times when we have requested for an approval for a sports day. My sports day was over, and
16 after one week I got an answer, yes you are allowed to do the sports day. When we are doing an
17 event, we have got to inform more than five hundred people that this event will take a place, and
18 if I have to wait for the ministry's decision, I am not able to do the event. Someway then we feel
19 guilty without the permission we did the event. From my side I informed the ministry, but they
20 didn't get back to me on time. So someway the ministry takes dogmatic position. That is one
21 point I feel.
22 **Researcher**: On the basis of your experience, of course they are regulations in supervising the
23 private schools and there is a bylaws which clarifies the authority the private schools have.
24 Before implementing this bylaws, did the ministry get your views?
25 **Interviewee**: No, they don't take our views, but when they come to supervise, they do guide us. I
26 am absolutely lying if I say they don't know. As I said they are very cooperative. I have been a
27 foreigner. They really helped me out because I can't read and write Arabic. Initially, when I
28 started my own school, I could not follow lots of things and I am really thankful for the ministry
29 for guiding me on every step. I don't say that when they come, they have just signed and given
30 me a memo this is not done, but before issuing a memo to me they warned me that the school
31 should have 1 2 3 4 5. I am really thankful to the ministry for this.
32 **Researcher**: So, do you think that the private schools did not participate in any decision made by
33 the ministry? And why?
34 **Interviewee**: No, I don't aware of it and I said that because I am not Arabic speaking, so they
35 maybe feel that it is difficult to approach me, but there was a conference few days back and I
36 have seen a lot of private schools' heads talking on that. So I am sure the ministry does ask, but
37 not to me. I don't experience this.
38 **Researcher**: Who makes the final approval of the private schools' decisions?
39 **Interviewee**: We send to different departments in the ministry. For example, anything related to
40 the curriculum or new books we send it to Ms. (name). If it is related to legal issue, we send it
41 Ms. (name). That what I said there is no coordination in the ministry in departments, and that
42 where sometimes we are lost. Second, I feel sometimes the ministry is not flexible. Every
43 curriculum has their own requirement. Now, if I am using bilingual curriculum or Cambridge
44 curriculum or any curriculum, and if by referring other books, the productivity or the outcomes
45 of students' knowledge is good, I will not mind refer to that book, or allow the school to utilize
46 that book. So, this kind of flexibility is not there in the ministry. They have fixed, only this book,

Comment [o1]: Constraint: very long process in approving school's decisions (time pressures)

Comment [o2]: The MOE staff (difficulty)

Comment [o3]: Example of delaying approvals

Comment [o4]: Centralized system

Comment [o5]: Private schools involvement in decision- making authority

Comment [o6]: School's involvement

Comment [o7]: The MOE staff: no coordination

Comment [o8]: inflexibility

centralized curriculum

47 only this book. I feel when implement any curriculum, that curriculum does not have only one
48 publisher. They have ample/ plenty of publishers, and only five people can't read or write those
49 decisions. I mean only these people can't read those books. So, they should take our feedback
50 from the schools that you have used these books, give us your feedback, how you expect.
51 **Researcher**: Is this process not implemented?
52 **Interviewee:** It doesn't happen to me, but since last 2 to 3 years an official from the ministry
53 used to keep asking us what is your opinion about the business and economic curriculum. I give
54 another example, this year they introduced drama for grades 11 and 12. My teacher had meetings
55 very closely with the ministry, but the outcome was told to us that this year we are using this
56 book. There are 3 or 4 books that they gave us. But the majority of books in grades10 and 11such
57 as the Shakespeare has romance. One side they are allowing to use these books, the other side
58 they say no this is haram as to the religion, so we are lost in that. When you read the
59 Shakespeare. It is about Juliet and Seizer. The hall book is in romance, so I am confused
60 whether to teach the students or not. What should I do? So there are a lot of decisions
61 contradicting other decisions. Now this year grade 11 and 12 is very crucial year to the child's
62 life. If you introduce new books and if the teachers are not educated and trained well, my
63 students will suffer. So I think before taking any decision on curriculum we should give teachers
64 one semester to study what it wants.
65 **Researcher**: Do you think that the authority of decision- making should be conferred more
66 widely to the private schools?
67 **Interviewee:** Yes please. They should. I am not saying leave the decisions on them. The ministry
68 should take the decision, but we should be heard.
69 **Researcher**: Ok, if the authority of decision- making is devolved to the private schools, what are
70 the outcomes? Are there any positive or negative outcomes?
71 **Interviewee:** Definitely. As I said the ministry make the decisions, you will listen to the perform
72 schools before implementing. Out of ten if seven schools are saying this is correct, I think as a
73 head of department or the person from the ministry you can make the decision. If 70 are saying
74 this is correct, that means it must be correct plus your own opinion is there. So when the survey
75 has been done, it doesn't mean to cover all the 500 schools in Oman. Otherwise you will never
76 able to reach to any conclusion. What I feel is that you can divide the schools to different
77 categories and based on any decision is concerned only grade 1 to 4, only we have a meeting of
78 the best grade 1 to 4 schools, and not involve the big schools in that. But if it is a decision or any
79 kind of what which affects the big schools, then we should call the heads of these schools, maybe
80 the owners, the principals or the directors and take their concern also.
81 **Researcher**: Do you mean for any decision is made by the MOE, it should be taken the opinions
82 of the private schools?
83 **Interviewee:** Fine. Take their opinions. Decision you make. Here I have request one more thing.
84 Being a foreigner I am asking my circulars should come in English also, please. I am not saying
85 all circulars should be in English and Arabic, but the important circulars should come in both
86 languages because Oman is growing country. When you invite western to invest in the country,
87 and if you do not let them to understand what you say, it will be difficult to them to invest.
88 **Researcher**: What do you prefer whether to make your own decisions according to specific
89 guidelines without obtaining approval from the ministry or the decisions should be shared
90 between the ministry and the schools?
91 **Interviewee:** If it is small things of routine daily basses, the schools can go according the
92 guidelines. But if it is a major decision, ok then definitely should concern the ministry. If you do

Comment [o9]: Centralized system: inflexible system- centralized textbooks

Comment [o10]: suggestion

religious reasons

Comment [o11]: no clear decision - contradict decision

Comment [o12]: contradiction in decisions

Comment [o13]: students suffering due to centralized curriculum and contradiction

Comment [o14]: participating in decision-making- suggestion- school's voice should be heard

Comment [o15]: schools participation

The MOE should consult the right school. depends on decision.

Comment [o16]: how to make a shared decision

Comment [o17]: a request

Comment [o18]: the MOE's circulars should be bilingual

Comment [o19]: school authority in making decision

Comment [o20]: the ministry authority in making decision

93   not respect the law of the land, you are going wrong. But if it is a small decision like opening a
94   canteen, you have guidelines. The canteen shouldn't have junk food, do not have junk food. For
95   that you don't need to come to you and waste your time. These are small decisions in which the
96   schools can follow the guidelines and go ahead. But when it is big decisions where involving a
97   major change in the school, like say for example changing over to a new curriculum, no I can't
98   take decision without consulting the ministry. That is where I must go to the ministry.
99   **Researcher**: But do you choose any curriculum?
100 **Interviewee:** I choose the curriculum, but I should be ready to answer the ministry whatever
101 question they may ask me.
102 **Researcher**: Do you mean it has to be approved by the ministry?
103 **Interviewee:** Exactly. Bu if I bring a new curriculum and I submit my paper, may be sometimes
104 they don't understand what I am trying to say, then I should be given a chance to come and
105 explain my reasons to higher authority. This what I am trying to say, and this is the reason that I
106 am bringing a new curriculum to the country. Ok it should be full proved.
107 **Researcher**: Ok, regarding determining the school curriculum, including the national
108 curriculum, Islamic and Social studies, do you think these curriculum should be approved by the
109 MOE or given this authority over the private schools? I mean there are specific outcomes or
110 objectives of each subject or scope and sequence for each subject? Do you prefer that the schools
111 should choose the books for these subjects according to approved scope and sequence or they
112 should be approved by the MOE?
113 **Interviewee:** Now see what consist again as I told you earlier. Whether it is the ministry or the
114 school you can't expert and improve everything, so we did face problems like this. When we had
115 a mathematic supervisor from the ministry, he had a particular sequence. Now what I believe say
116 example of mathematic. I want to teach tables. Tables are very important because the entire
117 mathematic depends on tables. Today we meet our children with handicapped by giving them a
118 calculator. To learn table you should know what is addition. If I am teaching my student step by
119 step, I should be given a permission rather than saying no, no. you should teach them first table
120 and then teach them addition. It is not correct. Logically it is not correct, so the person who
121 comes from the ministry should be flexible if he understands the logical of it. If the logical is not
122 correct, don't accept me. For example, you have somebody who says number 7 has to be written
123 with cut. I don't find any logic. There are different ways of writing number 7. If my students
124 write number 7 like this and I can understand it, it is fine. I will not cut the student's mark
125 because he is not putting cutting between.
126 **Researcher**: This leads us to teachers' assessment. I mean evaluating teachers' approach and
127 method of teaching is right or wrong. Who do you think have the authority to make such
128 decision? Do you think that the ministry should or shouldn't interfere in this?
129 **Interviewee:** When they come to supervise us, the teachers normally have their teaching plan
130 which are in details. When we do a syllabus, the syllabus is divided into different areas like when
131 we have the whole area syllabus, then we have per-term syllabus or semester syllabus. We have
132 per month syllabus and we have per week and per day. When my book has all these stages
133 correct, it will give a guide of what I am going to work in the whole the academic year. When
134 your plan is good, execution in the class will be easier, and the same way when you execute in
135 the right way the outcome will be perfect. This the way we have in our school system, where in
136 the monthly bases we take a quiz. My idea is not to test the child. My ideas is what we have
137 taught to the student, whether he or she understood or no. by this I am testing my own ability
138 whether I taught my students in the correct way or no. it is not I am going to pressure my

Comment [o21]: decentralized : opening canteen *according to Criteria*

Comment [o22]: centralized decisions: curriculum

Comment [o23]: a chance to be heard: communication

Comment [o24]: decisions should be shared

Comment [o25]: the MOE intervention in teaching= constraint

139 students all time. The same in the following month we have a class test which consists of the first
140 lesson which has been done and the second. Here we test the child's memory in our old so. The
141 child has not forgotten that we taught in the last month, so revise these two and test them. The
142 third month we have again a quiz, so when you have continuous assessment, you are testing your
143 children as you work.
144 **Researcher**: Is it important that the supervisor visit and evaluate teachers?
145 **Interviewee**: Yes, please. I will be more happy to have them all time.
146 **Researcher**: Regarding students' assessment, can the ministry supervisor make any changes
147 about your approved assessment?
148 **Interviewee**: Sure why not. That is fine. We are two hands working together.
149 **Researcher**: Does it mean that he has his own decision?
150 **Interviewee**: No, it should between both parties, and then suppose we don't agree, we should not
151 feel defend about it. I may have a different opinion, you may have a different opinion. We can
152 both listen to each other and come to conclusion rather than having or feeling that oh the school
153 doesn't listen, useless school. The school is not trying to be like this at all. We are trying to
154 understand or do things which are best for our students. The outcome is my children.
155 **Researcher**: Who sets the final examination for your school?
156 **Interviewee**: We do because we have our own assessment. We do it ourselves. How do we do
157 that? I must tell you. Before the school starts, we give our staff all papers. The entire year
158 planning has been done. Every test and quiz or end of the term, for example class test, we give
159 them ten days' time to submit question paper and forget about it. We have three or four sets.
160 None of the teachers knows which set will be selected, so there is no way the teacher can go and
161 replaces and say revise only this because every teacher wants to improve. If the majority of the
162 class do not do well, that means it is not the children. It is the teacher who is not teaching correct.
163 So to save themselves they do revision. What I believe is when I take a paper a month back,
164 nobody remembers it, and I have four papers. Not alone, my team with the head of department
165 and supervisor will set together and select that is ok. This paper can test and consists of all topics
166 that taught this term, we will select this paper. That is how it works. So teachers are not aware
167 which paper is coming in the examination. Then we photo copy them and keep them in a safe.
168 Once the paper has been sealed, it is opened only on the day of examination. Before that nobody
169 is aware of it.
170 **Researcher**: Does it mean that the final examination should be set by the school's teachers, not
171 by the ministry?
172 **Interviewee**: It depends. I will tell one fine example here. There was a time that you have to
173 follow the paper from the MOE. our students found so easy that the whole exam got over in 15
174 minutes. We set our exam for one hour or two hours. I know in two hours some children are
175 struggling to complete. They speed up. But the ministry exam is so easy.
176 **Researcher**: Who should set the exam papers for grade 12?
177 **Interviewee**: For that the ministry should have a committee, maybe from various schools.
178 Experts or good teachers from every school should be allowed to sit down with the ministry to
179 prepare the papers according to the syllabus plan. And as I said take from them two sets. Let
180 them be in the ministry. When the ministry has experts, they will read all those sets and select
181 maybe two questions from this, two question from this, and then make their own paper and give
182 it for the examination. So it is not particular school will benefit. Everybody who has study well
183 will benefit from this examination. So it is not biased to any school, will be not be biased to any
184 student and at the same time you are not pressuring them.

Comment [o26]: shared: students' assessment

Comment [o27]: listening to others' views in order to have good decision

Comment [o28]: setting final examination is the school authority

How to set school exam

Comment [o29]: the authority of setting the grade 12 exam paper: shared decision

Comment [o30]: final 12 exam paper: centralized

Researcher: In this case, can the confidentiality of the questions or the exam be trusted from those teachers?

Interviewee: I will tell you what happens. When you take an example in a team of 7 or 8 schools, every teacher gives you two papers, so the ministry has got around 16 questions papers. Out of 16, they don't know, maybe from my school, maybe from her school or his school, and the ministry should not take the left paper as it is, no. select the topic wise. Say example in grade 12 you are doing (tegnometery), so take one question from tegnometry from school A, but for Algebra take from school F, so that is you can test the students. And what I suggest here one more thing is that when you take a question paper, ask the teacher to submit an answer sheet also in order to be easier because the students' answer will be corrected by third person who doesn't know anything and may has different concept, but when you have the answer sheet with you, you can say ok this is the answer should be.

Researcher: So do you mean the final grade 12 exam paper can be set by both the ministry and the private schools even there are experts in the ministry

Interviewee: Yes. You can do this exercise. You try an experiment. If you feel it successful, not necessary next year you call the same school. Give a chance to another school because only 7 schools is selected. You have 500 schools in Oman.

Researcher: How about appointing teaching and administrating staff, do you think that the decision should be made by the schools according to guidelines or the conditions of the MOE and no need to get the approval from the MOE, or what do you think?

Interviewee: For recruiting teachers I will tell you our system. I don't recruit my teachers because I like you, no. We have a process. Before selecting a teacher, we have written test, first. First of all we get the CVs. We scrutinize the CVs according to our requirements like, as an example, I normally do not take fresher, at least two to three minimum experience they did. After that, first would be written test. To test the teachers' language skills. I do not want my teachers to work in my school and they are not good in the language. Maybe math teacher or English teacher, the language control should be there. Now in that we have a parameter, minimum 75% in power, otherwise we throw it in dustbin. If the teacher doesn't know or have control, what she can teach my students. After the test, we call the teacher to be interviewed by the head of the subject and junior and senior supervisor, where they grill the teacher of subject knowledge. Once they find that person really, really good, they write their comments. Then we call this teacher for demonstration in the classroom. You know sometime people are PhD, but when it comes to practical, they are unable to control the students. So we call the teacher for demonstration. We give the teacher about 3 to 4 days' time to prepare a lesson. It happens like when we go overseas. You don't have time like this, so what we do is, we give the teacher a topic and we say, go out for 15 minutes, prepare your lesson and think I am a student of whatever age group we are recruiting her for, and tell her to teach us. That helps us to make a decision. After that is over, then there is a final interview with me. I will ask cross question my teacher on subject, on discipline because the teaching methodology has already been tested, and her personal life, the charge work, all I will test. If I feel I need, I will call my charge team to be with me, or I feel not, it is ok, I can manage. Then I put my comments, and then we shift the teacher to the charge department. Then ten days' time to start work. That's how we recruit.

Researcher: This is a good example on how to choose a teacher, but do you have to get finally approval from the ministry?

Interviewee: Yes, we do. Now sometimes it is very frustrating.

[Handwritten margin notes:]

How to set a shared exam paper for grade 12

Comment [o31]: shared area: setting the final grade 12 exam paper

Comment [o32]: an example of how the school recruit teachers

final approval from the MOE

Comment [o33]: difficulty regarding approving teachers

Researcher: Do you think this process needs to be implemented? Do you think you need the approval from the MOE?

Interviewee: Now I tell you. It depends on the school as I said. I have heard from the ministry people when they come here. Because they sometime don't have a teacher, they need some person to be hire. They just pick somebody. They say, Ok, be in class. It depends on what the schools want. As I told you my aim of running a good school is to prepare the next citizens of our country. If the child does not have a good schooling, then we have a problem. When they will grow, they don't know anything. Today we have a man, today in our generation, but not all. When graduated from the Sultan Qaboos University, he comes for a job and I ask him to write one letter. He don't able to write. Why? Because of the poor schooling. Because of this knowledge come from the school. If my language is good today, only the cost I had a good school. I can learn the technique, but I can't learn my language.

Researcher: Ok, again regarding hiring the teaching staff, do you think that the guidelines or the conditions of the MOE are not flexible. Do you think that there should be kind of flexibility?

Interviewee: I will give one example of my experience with my country people. Since I have studied there I know what we are taking about. Graduation is very common in India. Like the diploma of secondary education in Oman. You have to do a graduate. If you are not graduate from a college, the people look at you as nothing. It is common, even my housemaid is a graduate from college. Now what happens. By the time you reach your graduation or after you realize that this is not the field that I want to work. Then you switch on by doing a diploma in another field. For example, lots of females have graduated in commerce, but then they realize all of their working in office. I will have timing from 8 o'clock in the morning till at 8 o'clock at night which is not good. So they decide to work for the day at school. Now here if they are qualified, if they go back and did a degree or a diploma in education and ready to work with experience, like a fresher will not have any experience, but I know a fresher come and say ok don't pay me. I am fine without payment. I want to gain an experience. Now even do a Montessori training, it is not just a lesson. You have to appoint a teacher in the school, and that is a one year diploma, so that means a person has a one year experience. If the person is open minded, you can try a luck with the person. Keep them on preparation in there months. If they approve positive, hire them. If they don't approve positive, say I am sorry. I can't hire you. So the ministry should be flexible. Now the people who sign our teachers' papers, they don't even know the difference between the Bcom, BSc or BA. They say no, finish, that is. As I told the staff are not educated enough or trained enough.

Researcher: Ok, making a decision regarding the students' discipline or behavior. For example, to expel a student from the school, do you think like this decision should be made by the MOE or the school?

Interviewee: By the school, by the school because the ministry doesn't know what the child has been behaving in the school. But the school cannot make a decision, ok we don't want this boy, no. There has to be steps taken. Every decision should have enough of evidence to proof that we tried, tried, tried. We unfortunately did not succeeded, then we take this decision. I had my own experience before two years back in the school. A child would not study, and just before the exam he is good of find the cheats in different parts of his dishdasha. We don't allow him to go to the toilet. He said no and fight and went to the toilet and read the answers, cheating. So first we caught him. We shouted at him and took the paper, and put minus 5 marks. We told the student to inform his parents about what you have done, but children, no body will inform, so we did our duty by telling the father that today your son was caught cheating, but we gave him

Comment [o34]: when the ministry approval is needed for recruiting teachers

MOE staff needs to be knowledged about qualifications

Comment [o35]: flexibility in approving teachers

Comment [o36]: the MOE staff: lack of training

Comment [o37]: Decentralized areas: students' discipline or behavior + why

276 minus 5, but allowed him to continue the paper. Please make sure this will not happen again.
277 Finished. We did the paper work and put in the file. Now the same boy was caught cheating
278 again in the third paper during the exam. So what we did. We took this boy out of the class and
279 put him in another class alone with one teacher to finish the exam. We informed the parent again.
280 He failed the exam, but we have enough evidence to say. The exam of the first term got over.
281 The second term again he did the same thing. We had no other choice.to expel him. We contact
282 the father with the evidence, not one person, four teachers; subject teacher, the teacher who
283 contend, the senior supervisor and the principal signature. With enough evidence, five people
284 will not tell lies or hate your child. And then become his father. This is what has happened. I am
285 sorry next year he can't study in my school. The decision is yours.
286 **Researcher**: Regarding the school fees, to determine the school fees, do you think that approval
287 is important from the MOE or this should be the authority that given to the schools?
288 **Interviewee**: NO, no. See definitely there has to be outlined as I told you, but exception has to
289 be made. Like as I told when we shifted from Al kuwaire to here, we were in villa. I invested so
290 much money to build this school over here. You know our Omani partner, we respect him. he is
291 very nice man, but he has not invested even one hundred baisa in my school. Being a foreigner
292 and I have invested a million rial, definitely I need to back that money. Here the ministry should
293 support us. We are asking for high fee, but we are asking from that school to this school when
294 we came our expenditure has been tribble, not double. When I count my million rial if this fee I
295 got. Because my cash has to be in a good condition, so I can pay my staff their salaries. Like this
296 expenditure, I never cut down. Stationary, good quality because we are a quality school, so I
297 can't just keep them nonsense. So from how do I take my investment? So such situation the
298 ministry should understand. The ministry came and did a big survey, but what happened. Only
299 7% increased. I said only 7%. I don't how many years to take me. I am not come to a situation
300 where I say I am making a profit from school, no, in spite of 5 years. I think the ministry should
301 consider these things. I can't speak the language, so I am not able to convince the ministry
302 people why I am asking to increase my fees.
303 **Researcher**: How about those students who haven't paid their fees. The ministry says that they
304 should not be expelled from the school. They can continue or transferring them to a government
305 school. Do you think such decision should be made by the ministry or the schools?
306 **Interviewee**: I just tell you the ministry can help us, but the decision has to be done by the
307 school because being a private school, you are running a school with a help of this money. We
308 don't have other aids. The majority of money in the government schools has been taken care by
309 the government, so the principal or the teachers are not affected at all. In the private school we
310 don't have another resource of income. The students fees is the only source we have from which
311 we distribute money, by which we make up our budget and take care of our salaries and all of
312 expenditures. Last year I had 89 thousands rial to be collected. Where do I go? I did approach the
313 ministry earlier and said no, we can't do anything. It is your decision with the parents. 89
314 thousands rials is a big amount. Then I said, ok if I have to take a decision, I have stopped
315 everybody report card. I told them I am not against. I will keep it to see. but until less you pay I
316 am sorry I can't give you this. Still in spite of this we have some parents wouldn't care. Grade
317 one and KGs children have no problem. Parents can shift their children without the certificate.
318 So we lost a lot of money. Imagine I am running a school and take it as a business, how I will
319 repeat to bank. How I will pay my staff their salaries. In fact the ministry always interferes and
320 order us to give the certificate and tell us to go to the court to make a case. What the court will
321 do. I am paying my lawyer every month 500 rial, a fee to follow the parents. If you go to the

[Handwritten margin note: expelling a student should be based on evidence, and should be made from a team.]

Comment [o38]: school fees

Comment [o39]: unpaid student fees: decentralized decision ← why

Comment [o40]: the source of school fees

Comment [o41]: the MOE intervention: student fees

322 court, it will say give 50 rial every month until you finish 2000 rial. How many? two years. I
323 think the ministry should support the schools, should interfere, but should support the schools by
324 telling the parent, if you don't pay, I am sorry they can't release. A parent should understand if
325 he can't afford fees, he shouldn't bring the child to the private school. Shift him to the
326 government, so no have select at all. We are also human. Because of the economy change, one
327 father came to me and said I don't want to shift my children, but I don't have money. I will have
328 it after two months. I feel sorry to him and said it is ok. I opened my bag and I gave him money
329 and said go, pay for books and uniform. He promised me to pay me back. We are here to help
330 each other. Individual responsibility has to be taken. We are running a center for special needs.
331 Honestly I am telling you we are completely lost because the ratio is three students and one
332 teacher. They need more care. We don't have any money. Few can afford it. This is I feel my
333 social responsibility. I must to wait. But those who have money, they must pay me.
334 **Researcher**: Ok, what do you think who should make the decision to add a new class or a new
335 level to the school?
336 **Interviewee**: I feel if I need to add a new class, I have to prepare first. To add a new class means
337 a lot of responsibility. You need to arrange your teachers. You need to arrange your syllabus.
338 You need to make the requirement of the board is completed. For instance, if it is Cambridge, I
339 should have all the labs for grad 8, so first decision has to be done by a school that everything is
340 there. Then I will go to the ministry and approach them that ok we are ready. They inspect and
341 give us an approval. But in this it should not be delay. What happens if the ministry is going to
342 delay, then when I am going to announce. If I don't announce on time, I will have no child in
343 spite of investing so much of money.
344 **Researcher**: But is it important that to get approval from the MOE for that?
345 **Interviewee**: Yes, because they have to check in every school and because sometimes in Oman
346 especially I have seen people lies. But I said when I work with the ministry, I know people very
347 well and they know us now. For any school like some schools say something else and do
348 something else, so such school should be inspected more or should be extra care about.
349 **Researcher**: What are the requirements or conditions that should be fulfilled by private schools
350 in order to give the flexibility, the authority to make their own decisions and exceptions? Not all
351 schools are equal. On the basis of your experience, what are the requirements in order to grant
352 them this authority?
353 **Interviewee**: It is a cycle. If the school A has reached to the top, that means school A has
354 something very, very good exceptional which other schools don't have. If such schools make a
355 decision, the ministry should trust them, otherwise they will not reach at that level. But if a
356 mediocre or below mediocre like when we receive a student from another school. We have to
357 test that child first. If he is coming from a good school, I know his base would be nice and it
358 would be easier to teach him. But if he is coming from not good, unqualified school, then he so
359 will be very poor. I don't want to take a child who has not a good foundation. I know he will fail.
360 My school's result will go down. So the ministry can make the decision. They know which are
361 the regular good schools. Still keep an eye on them. I am not saying leave them. Keep an eye on
362 them, because I said some schools lie. I was upon a time a teacher in a private school and my
363 principal used to say lies. I remember he told me to pass a child, who doesn't know to write his
364 name. At the end I said I can't cheat.
365 **Researcher**: if the decision- making is devolved to the school authority and flexibility is granted,
366 who do you think are the people who should have this authority over private schools and

Comment [o42]: adding a new class Should be decentralized if school are prepared. But approved is imp.

Comment [o43]: centralized area: adding new class

Comment [o44]: schools to be centralized

Devolution Criteria

Comment [o45]: trust the good schools

schools should be followed-up

Comment [o46]: focusing on unqualified school

367 qualified to make decisions? I understand from our discussion that you allow teachers to
368 participate in making school's decisions.
369 **Interviewee**: We are all human. Suppose I had a bad experience with Ahmed's father and I want
370 to put him down, so what I will do. I stuck, trapping this boy. But if it is a group of 6 people,
371 then they say to me, no, no principal. He is a good student. Then I know he is not a bad student
372 because all 6 will question me. How can you say that. So when decision is made in a group, you
373 make a decision, but listen to everybody in the group. If a principal of a school makes a decision,
374 and if the ministry come and question why that decision is made, he should be able to justify his
375 or her decision, that I made that decision because of 1,2,3,4,5,6. Then it is ok, otherwise no.
376 Because once a person loses his fear, then leave things I can do what I want to do. That is not
377 correct. It is very, very sad that in our education industry the majority of people work for money,
378 not for the cost, so if there is no check on them, they will not for the students. They will work for
379 filling their lockers, which is not correct. So check should be there, but there has to be flexibility
380 from both sides. So flexibility and know other opinion like when you meet other person and talk
381 with him you know how knowledgeable the person is.
382 **Researcher**: So the participation is from all, but do you mean the final decision is made by the
383 principal? And if so, why?
384 **Interviewee**: Yes, because at the end of the day the person who is sitting that chair is unstable.
385 When you say this school is bad, nobody knows the school's teachers because they come and go.
386 The owner and the principal of the school is there, so that person is unstable.
387 **Researcher**: Do you think that parents should also participate in making some school's
388 decision?
389 **Interviewee**: They should, should please, but not in decision- making. We can never clap with
390 one hand. We always believe that it is triangle, parents, school and the ministry. If three of us
391 join hands properly, we can produce beautiful education system, but alone all three will fail.
392 **Researcher**: Do you think training is very important?
393 **Interviewee**: Yes. Not very, but it is important. There is a lot of things we learn from our
394 experience, but training opens different views of the same thing.
395 **Researcher**: What kind of training?
396 **Interviewee**: I believe a lot in training. I will give you an example. We have our staff joining the
397 school minimum 25 days before the students come. During this time I train them about time
398 management. We have 40 minutes for one lesson. If the teacher does not know how to utilize
399 that 40 minutes, she will never able to complete her work. So what we do. When we have
400 workshop, we give them an example. Over 40 minutes, I will take 5 minutes in class control.
401 You have left 35 minutes. From 35 minutes minimum 15 minutes should go for teaching,
402 explanation, whatever your topic you are teaching to the students. Remaining 20 minutes, 5
403 minutes take it out for recollecting what you have taught and homework writing. Then with 10
404 minutes left, you have to do written work, to clear the students' drought. If you plan your lesson
405 like that, you will be able to have very successful lesson with beautiful outcome. Lots of
406 teachers, even they have taught, but they don't have idea how to distribute their time, and
407 always they are struggling and complaining, I couldn't finish my work. Why? Because they
408 don't plan. So training is necessary.
409 **Researcher**: Do you have any suggestion or anything to add before finishing our discussion?
410 **Interviewee**: No, just if this project will do an effective contribution from the ministry to the
411 private schools, then I will do have, yes please. I just request whether it is Oman or any part of
412 the world, English is the language which is universal today. The staff in the ministry should be

school's decisions should be made in group

Comment [o47]: decision-making techniques at the school level

Comment [o48]: principal is the final decision maker + why

Comment [o49]: parents' participation

Comment [o50]: the responsibility of DM

Comment [o51]: training

Comment [o52]: time management training: teachers

413 bilingual. They should have knowledge of this language because 75% of the world population
414 work with this language, so if we want our country to grow in the positive, then we should make
415 sure our staff should be qualified and educated. I feel really hurt when my students have to spend
416 one year in foundation. One year is valuable of our life they have to spend. For what? because of
417 our academic system is not up to the market. Why is an Indian child is given immediately
418 admission while Omani is not? Because we are going wrong somewhere. We don't work from
419 the heart. I am not saying that western or Indian or Omani people are not good people.
420 Everybody is nice, but let set a kind of ideal way of working. The way we work for the cost, not
421 only for money. That will help, and circulars and all should be in two languages, please. You
422 know it is drawback to me today. Sometimes I am blamed by the ministry people that I do not
423 replay to their letter. I said where is it. I did not receive.
424 **Researcher**: Ok I would like again to thank you for your time. Would you like to add any
425 comments?
426 **Interviewee**: No, it is my pleasure. I hope I have been able to help you.

MOE staff should know English

Comment [o53]: the importance of qualified staff

Comment [o54]: using English in the ministry's circulars

1   -   Introduction + experience: 8 years

2 **Researcher**: What is your opinion about the current MOE system in making private schools'

3 decisions?

4 **Interviewee**: According to the ministry system, we have to take approval for all the issues of my

5 schools if I would like to change the policy of the school timing or uniform. I cannot make any

6 decision without their approval. For the discipline issues I have to follow the rules exactly. If I

7 do not, we will be given warning letters. They keep us in a little cage and we do not have any

8 say. We have to do whatever they say. It is difficult for us in the sense we cannot implement our

9 own initiatives. We are not allowed to. So all decisions are centralized. For example, when we

10 want to change the school uniform for the next year, we have to come up with a proposal and the

11 cost, and sent it to the ministry. If they will not approve, we cannot go ahead. We have been

12 trying for one year and a half now. When it comes to school fees we only are allowed to raise our

13 school's fees every three year. When it comes to the number of the lessons teachers have to

14 teaching, it is 24 lessons. The number of teaching hours and the textbooks we use, and

15 everything is set by the MOE. We cannot even change the textbooks without their approval.

16 **Researcher**: To what extent do you participate in decision- making process?

17 **Interviewee**: I send the social worker of the school to the ministry in order to come to agreement

18 of some issues. If we do not agree of them, we do meet together with the ministry people in order

19 to come a decision. So it happens.

20 **Researcher**: Do you think the authority of decision-making conferred to private schools is

21 enough?

22 **Interviewee**: Well, I can understand that why they control the private schools because if they do

23 not, every school do of whatever they want. On the other hand, we need sometimes flexibility

24 especially when we come to choose the school curriculum. For example, they brought a rule that

25 every child in grade 10 in the international stream he has to pass 4 IGCSE's subjects or he fails

26 the year. He is allowed to do a reset exam, but he has to study year 10. So he loses the half of 11

27 year which we do not feel fair. We feel they should be promoted, even the child do the reset, but

28 the ministry does not agree. It is sometimes they enforce a rule without knowing the impact of

29 enforcing. There is a rule that expatriate students have to do Social studies in English. But we

30 were told this in August and the school starts in September and there is no way to get any

31 textbook in English or a teacher or anything and we have no English speaking social studies

32 teacher. So this when we face problems if we do not know. There is no time to implement new

33 things which makes very difficult for us. Also, in the grade 12 they change GD curriculum for

34 English. They do not plan in advance. This is a problem we face every year. They do not give us

35 enough time to get to the changes. They want it to be done immediately. The teachers get

36 frustrated.

37 **Researcher**: What are the other biggest constraints that you face in making school's decisions

38 according to this system?

39 **Interviewee**: There is a delaying from the ministry in approving decisions. We wait very, very

40 long time to get back to us for approving the textbooks, as an example. Also, one thing is all

41 correspondences in Arabic. We suppose as private international school we get no correspondence

42 in English. All the meetings are done in Arabic, so I saw my English teachers into meeting, but

43 in Arabic. There supposed to be English meetings. So that is one really frustration. Other big

44 frustration that we have is advisors do not understand the international curriculum that we teach.

45 So they understand the ministry one. When they come in, they do not understand the topics are

46 different. They give us a sheet say to teach a biology in three phases a week, but the curriculum

Comment [o1]: DM approval

← No involvement in DM

Comment [o2]: DM authority is centralized

Comment [o3]: DM approval

Comment [o4]: DM authority

Comment [o5]: DM approval

Comment [o6]: DM involvement

Comment [o7]: Why the system is centralized

Comment [o8]: The need of DM authority in schools

Comment [o9]: Constraint: MOE regulations

Comment [o10]: Constraint: time - consuming

Comment [o11]: Constraint: time pressures

Comment [o12]: Constraint: language communication

47 tells us we teach 4 phases in a week. So when they give us the sheet, there is so many Arabic, so
48 many English, so many math. That is according to the government syllabus, but they do not put
49 into their consideration that we do not teach the government syllabus, so they need to build a
50 bridge between the two curriculum and to put it there, but that has not happened yet.
51 **Researcher**: On the basis of your experience, what do you think are the positive outcomes of
52 devolving decision- making to private schools authority?
53 **Interviewee**: I think there will be more control in decisions. For example, we can expel a student
54 for two weeks instead of three days when two boys fight, especially if it is serious because
55 sometimes the parents are upset, and because sometimes the ministry make unsatisfied decision.
56 Sometimes it event protects students too much in a little bit other side. All students are
57 influenced because of one child disrupting. I expelled two boys and it took me more than a year
58 to get the ministry approving to get them out. In that time I lost many good students. They are
59 too scared because those two boys causing so many problems. So if the ministry gives more
60 authority, staff and principal will improve in the schools because we will be have more strict
61 rules than they are. They are very lenient when it comes to discipline.
62 **Researcher**: On the other hand, what do you think are the negative outcomes of devolving
63 decision- making to private schools authority?
64 **Interviewee**: I think some people abuse the power if decision- making is totally devolved to
65 private schools. I think there should be initially agreement between the two. Again if we are
66 given all authority, I know there are some schools are going to abuse it. They will promote
67 students that they should not be promoted. They will make up internal exam easy to keep the
68 parents happy. And this is where the ministry helps us because of the guidelines. The ministry
69 needs to be a little bit flexible when it comes to see the principal. A lot of principals, including
70 me, belong to a principal group in Muscat. We meet every two months. It will be good if one
71 from the ministry people join that meeting or join this committee to see what problems we are
72 facing because we never get to give us opportunity as principals of private schools to discuss our
73 problems in the ministry. I think we can also help the ministry if we can make it to meet every
74 body. It is sometimes silly. For instance, I do not know why the ministry cannot give us the plan
75 of the workshops for a whole year and they ask us to give them the school plan for the whole
76 year. The ministry just needs to plan ahead a little better that they are. If there is workshop for
77 English secondary teachers, I have to close the secondary English section in my school for one
78 day. What I will do for my students. If I do not send, they will give us a warning letter saying
79 your teachers not attend the workshops which it might be difficult. I have got PT teacher. He is a
80 very good in a basketball coach. Last year the ministry wanted him to go to coach for one month.
81 If he leaves for one month, who is going to teach the curriculum? The ministry sent me a
82 warning letter. They should understand the school run in a daily bases. So if they give us their
83 work shop or events in advance, then we can plan and support them. We need to now. The
84 parents are paying a lot of money for private schools and they get upset if a teacher are not here
85 for two days. The ministry needs to understand.
86 **Researcher** In your opinion, what are the areas that should be conferred to the private schools
87 authority in decision- making? And why?
88 **Interviewee**: I think one would be to run our own policy. That is a big thing because what
89 happen at the moment the parents are fighting us with the ministry. If I suspend a child for three
90 days, the ministry says the rules say only one day. That is one thing. They need to give us
91 authority to do our own policy. The second thing is the curriculum. The ministry should allow us
92 to work out exactly what the balance is between teaching Arabic, Islamic and Social compared to

Comment [o13]: MOE intervention in teaching international curriculum

Comment [o14]: Constraint: time- pressures

Comment [o15]: Positive outcome: Control over decision making

Comment [o16]: Positive outcome: school improvements

Comment [o17]: Negative outcomes: power exploitation

Comment [o18]: Negative outcomes: power exploitation

Constraint: Central regulations

Comment [o19]: Constraint: participation in workshops

Comment [o20]: Decentralized area: setting the school policy: students' discipline standards

93 international curriculum. I am sure that we all make sure there is a balance because I assume I
94 have Arabic, Islamic and Social curriculum as well. But now for instance I should have 11
95 Arabic and 4 Islamic, so that 15 lessons are taught by Arabic, where English is only 6 and math
96 is only 6. So there is much less emphasis on the international curriculum. This is not a
97 government school. They need to understand that has to be a 50/ 50 balance. So those are two
98 things, the discipline and the curriculum. They need to give us more lenient, so we can do our
99 own things. We still meet the requirements. They must be more flexible, but they are not.
100 **Researcher**: How is about the hiring and firing the teaching staff? Who do you think should
101 have this authority?
102 **Interviewee**: The ministry do not really interfere in that. Now they might have strict regulation
103 when a teacher is coming like check the qualification very carefully. In the past, it was very
104 easily. You could put anybody in. Now for the first time all the certificates and the transcripts
105 have to be indicated and checked, so they become very strict on that. I know some schools
106 complain. I am very happy. The ministry now check the right teacher in the right subject, which
107 is very, very good, so for that I take my hat off. They are strict and that is good.
108 **Researcher**: Do you mean the authority of appointing teachers should be on the hand of the
109 ministry?
110 **Interviewee**: No, no. What I mean is that the school does the appointment, and we cannot be
111 given the ministry clearance for the easiness that we used to, which is good. All the appointments
112 are done by us. Sometimes the ministry send CVs of good teachers. Sometimes we employ them
113 and sometimes not. We have started in our school getting Omani teachers which is very, very
114 good thing. So we are trying to bring more Omani teachers as well to have a balance with
115 international teaching staff. We have got teachers from 14 nationalities in our staff, which is
116 good. It is a good mix. The ministry have never interfered in that.
117 **Researcher**: Is the approval of the MOE for appointing teaching staff important, and why?
118 **Interviewee**: Yes, because without the MOE's clearance we cannot get a visa. Without the
119 ministry approval, we cannot precede in appointing teachers. The ministry also brought a new
120 rule that no an international teacher can come if he does not have two years of experience, which
121 is again is very good thing. One thing they brought in is that teachers have to get IELTS
122 certificate. So that if teachers are from Pakistan or India or whatever, and they do not speak
123 English at home, they have to have English teaching certificate as well, which again is good. So
124 the ministry is really a very strict in staff, which is very good. I will be very honest with you.
125 Some schools bring very cheap teachers like Indians, but to bring a British teacher is very
126 expensive. So some schools are noticed to take a short cut because of their budget constraint and
127 bringing Indian teachers, where British teachers are better, so that the ministry force us to bring
128 better teachers, which is good. I am very happy of that. We just plan our budget better. We got
129 now more British, more American teachers teaching fiction at English. We had had a lot of
130 Indian teachers teaching English in the past. Our kids never learned proper British English as
131 they should, and their parents were not happy. Now we have to which is good. So I am very
132 happy that is one thing as to be strict now.
133 **Researcher**: In your opinion, who should have the authority of determining students' admission
134 age in the schools?
135 **Interviewee**: The MOE should have the authority of determining the admission age. The
136 problem is that if I take my own children, I worked in seven international schools and because
137 some countries there is no age. My son had never 12 years of schooling because he was in year
138 three in one country. When he come here, his age should be in year 6. So if the ministry does not

Comment [o21]: Decentralized area: determine the periods number of teaching subjects

Strict regulations in appointments

Comment [o22]: Centralized area: Setting appointment regulations

Comment [o23]: Centralized area: Approving teachers appointment

Comment [o24]: Centralized area: Setting appointment regulations

Comment [o25]: Centralized area: admission age

139 control that, people will cheat. Students will have never 12 years' experience. As a teacher I have
140 seen the problem in students that I have because my son graduated when he was 15 years old. He
141 is too young. But according to the ministry's rules, he had to going in certain grade which is
142 good. They force us to put him back. There is a lot of complain in our school. Some parents feel
143 students should start younger, but this is in Indian and Pakistani community where they push the
144 kids very quickly, but emotionally students are idiots. The ministry's rule is perfect for that. All
145 my staff, especially in KG, agree that if there is not fix age, we will have students two years in
146 KG 1, which will not work, so there should be a control in that. Also, I have seen in Oman there
147 is a train that if a parent does not like a school A, he can take him to school B, and if he does not
148 like school B, he can take him to school c. If the schools have not the same age, there will be no
149 control over using which level, which might be very difficult.
150 **Researcher**: Let us go back to the national curriculum, Arabic, Islamic and Social studies. What
151 do you think about granting private schools the authority of teaching or non-teaching those
152 subjects, especially to Omani students?
153 **Interviewee**: I think if the ministry does not force private schools to teach those subjects, the
154 Omani students will not take them. There is a lot of Omani students in our school who do not
155 want to do Social studies and Arabic because they feel weak. I think it is the only way the
156 ministry can protect the Omani heritage. I feel it is important. What we do now in our school is
157 that all expatriates students have Arabic as well. The Omani students have Arabic as the first
158 language and the expatriates students have Arabic as the second language, so they can complain
159 only on that. The only thing is that I feel they should allow us to teach the Islamic studies in
160 English as well, which we do not have at the moment, because we got Muslims students from
161 Malaysia and India, but they do not speak Arabic, so they cannot go to Islamic classes. Their
162 parents want them to do that, but we are not allowed to do that. The ministry wants it to be
163 taught in Arabic, which is not fair to expatriates students who are Muslims. The same is for the
164 Social studies, which cannot be taught in Arabic. They can give flexibility of Social studies and
165 Islamic to be taught in English as well. Students, who do not speak Arabic from the kindergarten,
166 can choose. That helps us a lot. We got in our schools at least 100 students who are not Arabic
167 speaking, but they are Muslims. They want to do Islamic classes, but they cannot because of the
168 language. Now they would go, but they will be only listeners and they will not understand
169 anything, which is limited. I mentioned to the ministry and they said they are looking into it. It is
170 very easy for the expatriates students to get the Educational General Diploma (EGD) in grade 12
171 without doing the Arabic, Islamic and Social and get high grades, while the Omani students are
172 pay for life because they have to do those extra subjects. If the ministry allow us to teach Islamic
173 and Social subject in English, it will be fair to everybody because in that way they have the same
174 number of subjects. They are looking into that purpose we are discussing, so I hopefully that
175 works. I think that we can get a teacher to offer Islamic in English, why not. It is the same
176 contents. It is only the language. The language is not say which regions. We will get a proper
177 Islamic teacher. We did this last year. We get a lady teaching Islamic studies for girls because
178 there are a lot of parents are complaining that a male teacher is teaching Islamic studies for girls.
179 **Researcher**: Who should have the control of contents of the Islamic Curriculum?
180 **Interviewee**: The ministry control it because what I seen from Arabic teachers is that the level of
181 Arabic and Social studies subjects is very good. We just want them to allow us to teach it in
182 English. We got staff who can translate it. We teach PE, art and music to EDG students. Those
183 subjects are always taught in Arabic. Now we are the first school that translate the curriculum

Comment [o26]: Centralized area: admission age

Comment [o27]: Centralized area: admission age

Comment [o28]: Centralized area: teaching national curriculum + why?

Comment [o29]: Decentralized area: Teaching the curriculum of Islamic and Social studies in English + why?

Comment [o30]: Decentralized area: Teaching the curriculum of Islamic and Social studies in English

Comment [o31]: Centralized area: the content of Islamic subject

184 and we are allowed to teach it in English, which is fine. That is we want for Social studies and
185 Islamic, just to translate exactly the ministry's curriculum into English. That is all we ask. .
186 **Researcher**: Who do you think should have the authority to set the final exams?
187 **Interviewee**: The ministry should control it because if I keep my own exam, I will make sure my
188 students will do good. Other schools might do the same, so there will be no standard at all. And
189 because the international exams are all external, I feel the ministry exam will be the same. I do
190 not know what is in the exam. I get the syllabus, I teach it and I make sure my students know the
191 contents.

> **Comment [o32]:** Centralized area: setting final exams

192 **Researcher**: If decision- making is devolved to school authority, Who should have this authority
193 over private schools? and why?
194 **Interviewee**: See, in every school there is a senior management team including the head of each
195 level; the head of GK, the head of primary and the head of secondary. I do not make decisions
196 myself. There are two vice- principals, one is for English subjects and one is for Arabic subjects.
197 We meet once a week. If there is a curriculum change, all of us have to agree because what
198 happens in KG affects secondary, what happens in secondary affects primary. So this committee
199 or team decide together for discipline, curriculum and everything. I do not make decisions
200 myself. Last year we started school at 7 o'clock which is very early. So now we start little later.
201 This decision was made by all of us.

> **Comment [o33]:** DM techniques /styles

202 **Researcher**: What do you think about involving parents in making school's decisions?
203 **Interviewee**: I think it is very important to involve them. We have advisory parents who are
204 basically organizing the PTA. Parents do not have a say as such they cannot tell me to change the
205 curriculum. They can advise the school board which listen to the complaints of the parents, such

> **Comment [o34]:** Parental involvement

206 as they are not happy about the food in the cafeteria or the grade one toilet or whatever. They
207 may come with suggestions and help us to change it. So they may advise us to make any
208 changes. They sometimes help us. They may feel that teachers are not doing what they should.
209 They can come and investigate the issues cafeteria food. If there is a problem, we will change it.
210 They are very supportive.

> **Comment [o35]:** Parental involvement

211 **Researcher**: Can be they involved in making decision about school's fees, and why?
212 **Interviewee**: Unfortunately not because the school is privately owned. There is an advisory
213 board knows about the school budget. According to the ministry's rule, the schools are allowed
214 to increase the school fees every three years. Before we increase it, there has to be business plan.

> *Parents should not involved in school fees*

215 It has to go to the ministry. They are looking to certain issues and to check if the school is
216 qualified or not by making sure of the reasons why the school wants to raise its fees. It is fine.
217 They are protecting the community. Otherwise the school's fees will be doubled as they can.
218 Some people can buy, and some are not, and that is not fair. Private schools are very, very

> **Comment [o36]:** Centralized area: School fees

219 expensive. We have to look at the market as well to see what we can offer like our school does
220 not have own auditorium or sports facilities the other schools have. We can put our school's fees
221 the same as these.
222 **Researcher**: Do you think training is very important for decision makers? If so, what kind of
223 training
224 **Interviewee**: Yes, definitely. Decision makers should look to the whole picture before making
225 any decision. They should have experience and they should be specialists in the area of making
226 decisions. Otherwise it does not work.

> **Comment [o37]:** Training

227 **Researcher**: I would like to thank you again for your time and thank you for your participation.
228 Would you like to add any comments before finishing our discussion?
229 **Interviewee**: No. Thanks. My pleasure and you are most welcome any time even we are busy.

Researcher: First of all I would like to thank for your time to participate in discussion with me regarding devolving decision- making in the private schools in the Sultanate of Oman. In the beginning I would to get your opinion regarding the current MOE system in making the decisions of the private of the school. Do you participate in these decisions before implementing them here in the school?

Interviewee: We do not have any chance at all in making decisions or even to share or anybody has asked us about our opinion. Regarding private schools is a matter of business, so decisions are divided between the owner of the school and the MOE, so I think teachers and the management of the schools do not have the right to make any decision. No, we do not have. Decisions are made in the central of the MOE and we have to follow them. It is 100% the ministry make decisions of the private schools in all fields.

Researcher: Who makes the final approval of the private school's decisions?

Interviewee: From my own experience I know that the school should get approval from the MOE for everything such as hiring teachers, choosing books, setting exams, and location of the school building.

Researcher: What are the biggest constraints that you face in making school's decisions according to this system, for example in implementing the curriculum?

Interviewee: Me as a teacher I do not face any problem, but may be the owners of the school have different opinions. In contrary, regarding the school curriculum the ministry makes it easy for us. The curriculum is already there. No need to search in order to choose the curriculum. The ministry provides us with the high quality books to choose from.

Researcher: Is authority of decision-making conferred to private schools enough?

Interviewee: I think it is difficult to devolve decision- making authority to private schools because in the ministry there are consulted people who are very experienced and they are specialist in making private schools' decisions like in preparing the curriculum. They are highly qualified and educated. Some of them are English native speakers. It is not guarantee in all private schools to make the right decision if this authority is devolved to them. You will find a big mess in the schools. They might implement an easy curriculum. I think it is better the ministry controls the whole system in a good way. In my opinion, I like that the decision-making authority is on the hand of the ministry because they have highly qualified people. it is the best place to make decisions, especial the curriculum. Such people are not found in all the schools. The private schools need to pay a lot to hire qualified people in order to prepare the curriculum. They might choose low level books if they do not have qualified people.

Researcher: Who has the authority to make the teaching plan?

Interviewee: It can be done by the senior teacher of the subjects with the guidance from the ministry supervisor.

Researcher: Is it important the ministry supervisors interfere in this field?

Interviewee: I do not consider it as interfering because interfering means negative. They are guiding us to the correct way. They supervise us to do the best or to do better in your work. For example, when my supervisor comes here, he gives me outlines to follow. These guidelines are important for your work to perform well.

Researcher: How is about setting the private school exams? Who do you think should have the authority for this area?

Interviewee: I think the authority of making exams should be on the hand of the ministry because if you let it to the school, 100% you will find a mess and each school follow different system. The private schools should follow the ministry's specification in setting their exams.

Handwritten margin notes:
- DM is centralized
- PS are not shared in MD

MOE is the final DM

Why should DM
why DM should be centralized

MOE intervention In teaching

Comment [o1]: DM involvement
Comment [o2]: DM authority
Comment [o3]: DM approval
Comment [o4]: No constraint
Comment [o5]: School curriculum
Comment [o6]: the need for DM devolution
Comment [o7]: negative outcomes
Comment [o8]: the need for DM devolution
Comment [o9]: negative outcomes
Comment [o10]: shared area: teaching plan
Comment [o11]: MOE intervention
Comment [o12]: Centralized area: setting exam

47 which should be checked by the supervisors if they are according to the specifications. These
48 specifications control the schools to prepare fair exams for students.
49 **Researcher**: Who has the authority to make decisions regarding students' behavior like
50 expelling a student from the school?
51 **Interviewee**: I think this point should be under the ministry supervision. It is the matter of the
52 ministry because it might be the school has something against the student or his parents, so it
53 will be personal like that. But if the decision is made from the ministry, it will be very fair and it
54 will be well controlled. For example if a teacher does not like a student for personal reason, he
55 might dismisses him or her from the class.
56 **Researcher**: Who do you think controls teachers' salaries in the private schools?
57 **Interviewee**: Now this point is opened between the school and their teachers. It is a matter of
58 negotiation. You may find in the same school two teachers have the same experience and
59 qualification, but they have different salaries. It is unfair. In my opinion salaries must be under
60 the supervision of the MOE or the ministry of manpower, although it is a big headache.
61 **Researcher**: Who have the authority to choose the extra curricula activities of the subjects?
62 **Interviewee**: I think it is safe if they are made by the MOE. Once I chose a book for my
63 students and there was something written inside the book about the Valentin day and
64 Halloweens, which is not acceptable in the culture of the country. It was a mess and the ministry
65 supervisor blamed me. So I prefer that the MOE determines the books that can be chosen as extra
66 activities in order to use the suitable ones.
67 **Researcher**: Regarding the school's calendar which specifies the teaching days and holidays,
68 who should have this authority?
69 **Interviewee**: It does not matter. It can be made by either the ministry or the school. It is the same
70 because you have to finish a curriculum which is under the supervision of the ministry, so it
71 takes the same time whether the calendar is made by the school or the ministry. If the decision is
72 left for the school, it cannot maximize or minimize the length.
73 **Researcher**: If decision- making is devolve to the school authority, who should have this
74 authority over the school?
75 **Interviewee**: It depends on the kind of the decision. Those who have experience in a field and
76 involved with it should participate in decision- making process. It can be the school owners,
77 principal and teachers. If the school owner is qualified and educationalist, he can participate in
78 most of the school's decisions, but it cannot be for non-educationalists. Me as a teacher I can
79 participate in all kinds of decisions because I have 25 years of experience in education fields. For
80 example, choosing the English curriculum can be decided by me and other English teachers
81 anonymously. We meet together to discuss each one's comments about the proposed books and
82 we choose the suitable one for our students.
83 **Researcher**: Do those participants require any training? If so, what kind of training?
84 **Interviewee**: Of course we need courses or workshops training, especially if there are modern
85 things in a field even they are costly.
86 **Researcher**: Do you need to add something or a suggestion regarding devolving decision-
87 making in the private schools?
88 **Interviewee**: Thank you so much.
89 **Researcher**: Thank you for your participation.
90 **Interviewee**: Thanks.

Comment [o13]: Centralized area: Setting exams specifications

why is expelling a student is the MOE; authority ?

Comment [o14]: Centralized area: students discipline

Comment [o15]: Centralized area: staff's salaries

Comment [o16]: Centralized area: extra-curricular activities

Comment [o17]: Decentralized area: school calendar

Comment [o18]: DM participants

Comment [o19]: School owner involvement

Comment [o20]: Teachers involvement

Comment [o21]: Training

1 **Researcher**: Thank for your time to participate in discussion about devolving decision- making
2 in the private schools. (introduction).
3 **Interviewee**: You are welcome and it is my privilege to participate in this kind of research that
4 will help schools easy to make decisions and to be more autonomic.
5 **Researcher**: As a parent I would like to know about your opinion regarding making the private
6 schools' decisions according to the MOE system? Are they involved in the process of decision-
7 making as well as you as a parent? And to what extent do you participate in decision- making
8 process?
9 **Interviewee**: I think from my own experience decision making is central. It is made by the MOE
10 or it has to be approved by the MOE. I think it is rarely for parents to participate in making these
11 kind of decisions.
12 **Researcher**: Who makes the final approval of the private school's decisions?
13 **Interviewee**: As far as I know the private schools have to get the final approval from the MOE.
14 but I think it is better if the decision making would be from both the MOE and the private
15 schools. It should also be shared with the head of sections in the schools and parents.
16 **Researcher**: Do you think that the private schools face any difficulties in making their decisions
17 according to the current system of the MOE? and if yes, what are the biggest constraints?
18 **Interviewee**: It takes a lot of time to make a decision. Also, it is a bureaucratic system. It has
19 been decided by one organization without taking care of users. It is impose from top to bottom.
20 **Researcher**: Is authority of decision-making conferred to private schools enough?
21 **Interviewee**: I think it should kind of decisions is allocated to the private schools and the role of
22 the ministry should be as a supervisor.
23 **Researcher**: What are the criteria that the private schools should have in order to devolve the
24 decision- making to their authority?
25 **Interviewee**: All those people who should make decisions should be qualified. They should have
26 certain experience, certain kind of education and certain kind of training to enable them to make
27 suitable decisions.
28 **Researcher**: What do you think are the outcomes of devolving decision- making to private
29 schools authority? Are there positive or negative outcomes?
30 **Interviewee**: I think there are some positives more than negative outcomes. First from the
31 positive side decision making will be more faster. They aware as it is from them, so they own
32 that their ideas and once they made the decision, they want to be a success. So it is more like to
33 be successful once the decision is made because they are countable to make it. They are aware of
34 the situation and atmosphere of the school. They are aware of the specifications of the students.
35 They know their previous experience, so it is easier to make that kind of decisions. It will
36 maintain the moment of decision making. The negatives outcomes can be that the schools will
37 become over powered. Also, if they do not have the experience, decision can have negative
38 impacts.
39 **Researcher**: What is the role of the MOE if decision making devolved to the private schools?
40 **Interviewee**: If the private schools are given the authority of making decisions, they should be
41 accountable for those learners. If there is a negative impact of that decision, the MOE can
42 interfere. I mean the MOE should standardize the system. They should give the guidelines to the
43 private schools in order to follow and to be accountable. So there should be some criteria for
44 what type of decisions that be given to the schools, and what type of decisions that the MOE
45 have.

Parental involvement

Commented [o1]: Centralized system

Commented [o2]: Final approval from the MOE

Commented [o3]: Shared decisions

Commented [o4]: Constraint: time- consuming
Commented [o5]: Constraint: bureaucratic system

Commented [o6]: Devolving some decision s to The PS

Commented [o7]: Criteria of devolving DM

Commented [o8]: Positive outcomes

Commented [o9]: Negative outcomes

Commented [o10]: accountability

requirement of devolution

Commented [o11]: the role of the MOE

46 **Researcher**: You said that some type of decisions that be given to the schools. What are the
47 areas that should be conferred to the private schools authority in decision- making? And why?
48 **Interviewee**: For example, for the school curriculum, private schools should be given standard
49 and certain criteria that have to be fulfilled by the schools, and then the schools should be given
50 the authority to select what type of books to implement either to go for one type of books or elect
51 parts of books as long as they maintain the standard. This is one area. Secondly, private schools
52 should be given the authority of making decisions regarding the expansion of the school. They
53 can increase the number of classes, especially if the number of students is big to be taught in
54 small classes. Also, they can open new level in order to meet the students' need in order to be
55 more competitive for other schools. If they maintain the quality, they should be able to continue.
56 It should be an open market.
57 **Researcher**: Do the schools have the authority of not teaching the local curriculum including
58 Arabic, Islamic and Social studies if a parent does not want his children to be taught such
59 curriculum for specific reasons like the weakness in the Arabic language?
60 **Interviewee**: No, Omani students have to study them because they are part of our values. Arabic
61 is our first language and the language of Quran, so it has to be maintained. It should not be
62 excluded from the curriculum. So this authority should be on the hands of the ministry and
63 should not be given to the private schools because it is a part of the identity of Omanis.
64 **Researcher**: And how about the number of teaching periods or hours for these subjects, who has
65 this authority?
66 **Interviewee**: I think the ministry has this authority because it should be standardized by them.
67 **Researcher**: Regarding the school fees, who do you think has the authority to make the
68 decisions of this area?
69 **Interviewee**: The private schools should be given some extent or certain limit to increase the
70 school fees. They can increase the fees to certain limit and not to exceed it. It can be according to
71 the inflation or it can be according to the evaluation of the schools if they have an evaluation
72 system. For example, if the schools feel that their fees are high and their students are moving
73 from the school to other schools, they go back and evaluate the decision and they can reduce the
74 fees. But it should not compromise the quality of the schools. If there is a value of the money
75 that it is paid by the parent, I think the parents will be able to continue paying those fees as long
76 as they maintain or exceed the quality and standard of education in the school.
77 **Researcher**: Who has the authority of making decisions about the school building?
78 **Interviewee**: This authority should be given to the schools, but according to certain standards of
79 what type of building should be and also according to specific specifications, and what type of
80 equipment that they should provide. There should be a quality system that take care of all
81 elements of learning and teaching. So this should be supervised by the ministry, but the decision
82 should be given to the schools.
83 **Researcher**: But do the private school need to get approval from the MOE regarding using the
84 buildings?
85 **Interviewee**: I do not think so. As long as they maintain the standards, they do not need to get
86 the approval from the MOE.
87 **Researcher**: Who should have the authority of hiring and firing teaching or administrative staff
88 of the private schools?
89 **Interviewee**: I think this authority should be given to the schools.
90 **Researcher**: Why?

areas of devolving DM

Commented [o12]: decentralized area: curriculum

Reasons for decentralized areas of opening new level

Commented [o13]: decentralized area: school expansion

Reasons of Centralized national Curriculum

Commented [o14]: centralized area: local curriculum

Commented [o15]: centralized area: the number of teaching periods

Commented [o16]: shared decision: school fees

Commented [o17]: decentralized decision: school building

activities implementation

91 **Interviewee**: Because to maintain the competetiveness and to rise the standards. Also, the schools
92 know the standards of teachers and their capabilities and the quality of their teaching, so they are
93 able to evaluate the teachers, and therefore they should be given the authority of hiring and firing
94 staff.
95 **Researcher**: Do you mean that the private schools do not need to obtain the ministry's approval
96 for the appointment of any teacher or to be evaluated by the ministry?
97 **Interviewee**: I do not think so that they need to get approval from the ministry or teachers are
98 evaluated by the ministry.
99 **Researcher**: Regarding the assessment of students, who should has the authority of setting the
100 final term or semester exam or the final one?
101 **Interviewee**: The exams should be standardized by the MOE and implemented by the schools,
102 otherwise they misuse this authority to our children. The credibility will be not maintained. They
103 can be coverside. The assessment will be to their side.
104 **Researcher**: Who has the authority of making decisions about the students behavior, for
105 example to suspend or expel a student from the school?
106 **Interviewee**: I think this authority should be given to the schools according to certain standards.
107 All schools in the Sultanate should follow these standards, when they can expel or not expel. It
108 should be specified. The parents can go to the ministry if they feel that the decision is not fair or
109 overuse their authority. The ministry can check through the process if the school make the right
110 decision and according to the standards.
111 **Researcher**: We will move to the final section of the authority of making decisions in the private
112 schools. In your opinion who should have this authority over private schools? and why?
113 **Interviewee**: I think it should be distributed between the principal of the school, head sections,
114 teachers and parents, because decisions have impact of success and they should be involved
115 **Researcher**: Since these school are run privately, do you think owners should be involved in
116 decision making?
117 **Interviewee**: Yes, but not in all decisions I think. From the business side the owner can make
118 decisions, but from the education side decisions should be given to people who are qualified to
119 make. But if the owner is qualified and has previous experience in education, he or she can be
120 involved in making educational decisions, but not to be overpowered by the authority, and there
121 should be kind of accountability also.
122 **Researcher**: Do all these people that you mentioned participate in making all school's decisions
123 process?
124 **Interviewee**: Not all decisions. The decisions that concern them or if they are part of that
125 decision. For example, if they are implementing the decision, they should be involved in making
126 that decision in order to make sure that it is implemented in the right way and to make sure also
127 that it is going to be successful.
128 **Researcher**: How the decision can be made between the involved people?
129 **Interviewee**: There should be a final decision maker which is the school principal because they
130 might not agree to make one decision. It might be there will be disparity in making one decision.
131 **Researcher**: On which areas can parents participate in making school's decisions?
132 **Interviewee**: They can participate in different areas like which kind of activities should be in the
133 classroom. They can participate in open days activities and to some extent the curriculum if they
134 are qualified to make that decision. It depends on the parent if he qualified or not.
135 **Researcher**:. Do you think training is very important for decision makers? If so what kind of
136 training?

Commented [o18]: decentralized decision: hiring and firing school staff

Commented [o19]: centralized area: final exams

Commented [o20]: decentralized area: suspending or expelling a student

Commented [o21]: participants of making school's decisions

Commented [o22]: the role of school owner in making schools' decisions

Commented [o23]: the role of schools members and stakeholders

Commented [o24]: school principal

Commented [o25]: parents participation

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137 **Interviewee:** It is very important. They should have training in the process of making a decision,
138 leadership, team building, school autonomy, change management, quality, teaching methods,
139 assessment, curriculum, dealing with mix ability students, how to deal with slow learners and
140 talented students, financial business, competition, marketing and economy.
141 **Researcher:** How can they get this training?
142 **Interviewee:** It depends. For example, the school owner or principal should get a qualification in
143 leadership. Teachers should be given continuous workshops and training courses raising different
144 methods either traditional in classroom or on line or it can be both. Training should also be given
145 to the parents about how can take care of their children at home and on how to use the IT in
146 following their children's performance in the school.
147 **Researcher:** Before ending our discussion, do you need to add something or any suggestion
148 about devolving decision making authority in the private schools?
149 **Interviewee:** I think there should be kind of competiveness among the schools. They should be
150 evaluated regularly. The outcomes of the evaluation should be shared to the parents, so they can
151 select the schools which deliver high quality of education. The schools should be evaluated by
152 the MOE, through the Private Schools Directorate according to certain standards and criteria like
153 the Ofsted system that is implemented in the UK. The results should be published to the public,
154 so they can choose the best school that suits their children.
155 **Researcher:** So do you think that the ministry can depend on the results of this evaluation in
156 order to devolve more authority to the private schools in decision making?
157 **Interviewee:** Yes. It can be.
158 **Researcher:** Finally, I would like to thank again for you time and feel free if you would like to
159 add anything or to contact me if you need any more contribution.
160 **Interviewee:** You are welcome and I wish you the best in doing this type of research.

Commented [o26]: training

Commented [o27]: training

Requirement of devolution

Commented [o28]: the importance of school evaluation

Commented [o29]: criteria of devolving DM

Researcher: First of all I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in a discussion about devolving decision- making in the private schools. I am interested in your views and experiences regarding devolving decision-making in the private schools. Your participation in my study will aid my understanding of the devolution of decision- making and will be very important to my research and hopefully for improving decision making in the private schools. First, with regarding to the process of making decisions of the private schools I would like to know what is the role of the private schools administration in this process? I mean does the ministry allow the private schools to participate in making their decisions or not?

Interviewee: Sure. First of all before we start talking about private schools, I think the private schools supposed to be understood or to be analyzed within the bigger context, which is like in our the MOE in general and in the political system in general in Oman general. Oman as a political system is a centralized system and this is reflected in the MOE which has a centralized system, but for the last ten years almost or more there was a turn to go for decentralization, and most of the regions do many of their decisions. Now there is a strategy of education that calls also for schools themselves, I am talking about the government schools, to be decentralized to make their own decisions in many issues. However, because we depend on the way of financing is related to one source which coming from the Ministry of Finance. So mostly when it comes to the financial issues, centralization is still strong. However, when it comes to administration, there is more flexibility in this regard, and this is also reflected when it comes to the private schools. Private schools as from the name they are private, and since they are private they supposed to have their own decisions, but at the same time they are a part of system, which is the education system, which is supervised by the MOE, so there is a kind of dual system, the private sector that has its own regulations compared to the government and the MOE that is supervised. So the question is like what extend the private schools have their authority in making decisions. Now they have their own authority. We don't interfere in daily administration of the schools, but we have certain criteria that supposed to be followed. For example, when it comes for employing teachers, we have certain rules including the type of certificate that teachers supposed to be and what type of language. We don't ask them to bring a teacher from certain country, for example, or to bring this person or not that person. Ok this is one thing. Second thing when it comes to curriculum and programs. We have certain regulations for programs either to be bilingual or Omani national or to be international. But when it comes to international, we don't force the schools to take IB, for example, compare to IGCSE. The school supposed to take the decision on this. But at the same time they can't go and choose the Canadian. Also when it comes to the punishment of students, for example, they can do the system the school want, but they suppose not to exceed what you think the overall regulation of the ministry.

Researcher: Are the items of the private schools' bylaws approved by the ministry and the regulation clear to the schools on what area they have the authority to make their own decision? I mean are there any participation in the process of decision- making from the private schools? What I understand from the participants that the ministry makes the final approval of all private schools' decisions such as approving the curriculum, approving employment of teachers and issues of students' affairs including behavior and discipline.

Interviewee: Yeah, as I said there are certain regulations and laws that require from the private schools to follow on. So yes it is still centralized when it comes to this. If we take the issue of approval as a final decision, it is centralized, but again here as I said the flexibility of the school it is within the framework. For example, as I told you when it comes to international programs, we don't tell them to take this program or take Omani national or take bilingual, but you can

Comment [o1]: Why the MOE system is centralized

Comment [o2]: Why financial issues in the government schools are centralized

Comment [o3]: Administration is flexible

Comment [o4]: Private schools are a part of the MOE system

Comment [o5]: No interference in the private schools administration from the ministry

Comment [o6]: Flexibility in choosing teachers

Private schools should comply with the MOE's regulations

Comment [o7]: Flexibility in choosing program

Comment [o8]: Flexibility in choosing student discipline system

- Private schools have to follow the MOE's regulations
- MOE is the final decision maker

1

47   choose one of this. But in order to apply, for example, international program, you have to satisfy
48   certain criteria. They can't do their own selves like ok I need to do an international program and
49   I do it in a school that, for example, can't afford this by having no right place, having no right
50   teachers. This is what I am saying. Here when I told about how to define the decision- making, is
51   it the criteria or the flexibility within that criteria.
52   **Researcher**: So do they have the flexibility?
53   **Interviewee**: definitely, but at the end they have to follow that criteria when this. This is also in
54   most of countries. They are certain criteria and you need to follow them. But what type of the
55   details and the specifications, this is related to the schools.
56   **Researcher**: Do you have an idea what are the problems that the private schools face according
57   to the system of the MOE in making their decisions?
58   **Interviewee**: the bureaucracy is a big challenge for the private schools, and this is we trying to
59   do it. The long time that the process takes, is something we need to work on it. Sometimes
60   unfortunately follow up is a challenge. Sometimes also because of not clear criteria on some
61   points, unfortunately it becomes a personal interpretation for this. So yeah there are some
62   challenges, and this affects also on the private schools in making sometimes quick decisions
63   because they have to wait for the MOE approval, and that when I told you in some areas we need
64   to give more authority for the schools.
65   **Researcher**: Do you think the staff of the MOE in the directorate of the private schools are
66   qualified to make the decisions? I mean do they have full experience regarding how to
67   understand the demands of the private schools in order to make the right decisions?
68   **Interviewee**: Many of those staff are coming from government schools' experience. So they
69   need lots of training. I am sure some of them are well- qualified and actually many of them well-
70   qualified, but others need lots of training on this, so I can't speak all of them are qualified or
71   disqualified. It depends, but we are trying to select the right people. the challenge now happens
72   on the expansion of the private schools with the new issues, with new programs. This requires
73   lots of training for the staff.
74   **Researcher**: So as you said that the ministry is trying to make the centralized system to
75   decentralized one, is it the right time for the private schools to confer more authority in making
76   their decisions without going to the ministry to get the final approval?
77   **Interviewee**: I think as I told from the beginning that the country itself is going for
78   decentralizing many things including when it comes to the work of the MOE definitely, but there
79   are two ways of decentralizing. The first way is to felicitate decision- making process through
80   IT, through technology. For example, you don't need to come to the MOE and get the approval.
81   You can do this through on-line, and do it quickly, and you can track it, so this something will
82   facilitate and will help on this regard. The second thing now we used to have one decentralized
83   administration in the MOE in Muscat, but now we give the regions their own decentralized, its
84   own administration in the regions, and this also will reduce the centralization. When it comes to
85   the school, we would like to give more authority for the schools. There are some schools that are
86   well- qualified to do this, but other schools, especially the new and small ones, their experience
87   is not enough, and unfortunately they miss use this flexibility. This answers one of your question.
88   **Researcher**: If the ministry decide to allow the private schools to make their own decisions in
89   certain areas, what are the outcomes of this process? Are there any positive outcomes or negative
90   outcomes?
91   **Interviewee**: Positive outcomes are reducing first of all the time that is taken, reducing
92   sometimes the tension because not finishing on time, and make quick choices or decisions on

Comment [o9]: DM authority

Comment [o10]: Constraint: bureaucracy system

Comment [o11]: Constraint: MOE intervention

Comment [o12]: Constraint: MOE regulations

Comment [o13]: DM devolution

Comment [o14]: Training : MOE staff

Comment [o15]: Methods of decentralizing decision- making authority: using IT + devolving/ delegating authority to regions

Comment [o16]: The need for decentralization

[Handwritten margin notes: "Private schools have DM flexibility, but according to the MOE criteria." / "delaying in Decision approval" / "DM authority could be devolved to the well- qualified Private schools but not new and small ones."]

| 93 | time. Also it reduce hiring more staff here in the MOE because the work will be done by the | Comment [o17]: Positive outcomes: saving time |
| 94 | schools. But from other side, you know look at the system in Oman here which is conservative | Comment [o18]: Positive outcome: reduce the financial burden of hiring more staff in the ministry |

time. Also it reduce hiring more staff here in the MOE because the work will be done by the schools. But from other side, you know look at the system in Oman here which is conservative system to some extent. The community is conservative, so sometimes, especially when it comes to schools which have foreign people in administration, if you give them this flexibility, it might contradict with some values and some issues in here. This is one issue. The other thing is also sometime we might scarify the quality of education, because, for example, now we require certain criteria in selecting teachers, for the buildings and for the curriculum. But if we give the decision fully for the schools then that might be a problem because some schools might not be committed to these criteria. I don't think there is a country in the world that give full authority to make a decision. The advantage of any decentralization system is the flexibility which based on the rules and regulations.

Comment [o19]: Negative outcome: decision might contradict to some Omani values and issues

← Risk of violating rules

Comment [o20]: Positive outcome: flexibility in making decision

Researcher: Do you think that the bylaws and regulations of the private schools need to be amended in order to make clear for the private schools to have certain authority according to certain criteria to be followed for each area?

Interviewee: We are already in this process and we expect to get a new bylaws in a month. We already finish and the final procedure is going on. However, this bylaw doesn't give that much difference when it comes to centralization or decentralization as much it gives to clear procedures and more criteria and reduce bureaucracy to some extent. On the other hand and in addition to regulations what we are doing right now, we are developing the way of communication through the using of IT and that's I expect to reduce the negative impact of centralization.

Comment [o21]: The new bylaw

Comment [o22]: Overcoming the centralization constraints

Researcher: You said that private schools are not qualified to give them the authority to make them their own decisions without obtaining the ministry's approval. What are the criteria that do you think should be in the private schools? I mean I heard lately that the ministry is going to implement the system classification of the private schools, can we depend on the outcomes of this classification? For example, if a certain school will be classified in A level or B level as a result from this classification system, can we give them authority in decision- making according to this classification?

Interviewee: Definitely, the classification system will help us in many issues. First of all it will help us in the type of authority that we can give, the type of fees, the type of programs and many issues. An A school definitely will be given more freedom to do many things, but again according to certain rules. Compared for D or F schools that need to take care of them in order to grow up to better levels.

More authority could be ← given to schools A.

Comment [o23]: Criteria of devolving DM: classification system

Researcher: Regarding the areas that the ministry can give the authority to the private schools to make their decisions without obtaining the approval from the ministry. What do you think are the areas that should be conferred to the private schools authority in decision- making?

Interviewee: Actually, in order to give this authority we should make sure the quality of education is introduced in the schools, the system is working well, and the administration of that school is well- qualified. Then many issues can be conferred to the private school authority including the recruitment of teachers because A class schools supposed to have A class teachers. We give them the authority when they are doing their daily business which is nothing to do with us. For example, to fire a teacher or not to fire a teacher. This is not our business. They know that. They can have the flexibility in bringing teachers, the flexibility in doing their own daily schedule, the flexibility in timing and the flexibility in bringing textbooks. For example, when it comes to the textbooks, they can bring many textbooks. It is still that we give them the approval for using them, but we will not tell them you need to take this textbook. If this textbook will not

Comment [o24]: Criteria of devolving DM

- firing teachers could be devolved to Ps.
- flexibility in choosing textbooks

3

139 contradict with one of our culture, it is fine. So we need to make sure that schools take into
140 account first of all students' interests other priority, quality of education and the system of our
141 country. We can call it the habits and values. If we make sure these three issues are well-
142 respected, then there will be more flexibility in decision- making authority. Otherwise if one of
143 the three areas are threatened because we can't leave students un taught because their parents are
144 paying, and this our students at the end. We can't leave the safety of students at risk. We can't
145 leave the quality of education at risk. We can't leave like the values of our society at risk. Mange
146 this and I think many decisions will happen. I am looking for the classification's results to give
147 more authority at all.
148 **Researcher**: In the future after the ministry conferred more authority for the private schools to
149 make their own decisions, what is the role of the ministry at that time? Will be there follow up
150 visits to the schools to make sure that they are implementing according to the approved criteria?
151 Are there going to be accountability?
152 **Interviewee**: Sure. At the end any institution go to decentralization, the central authority
153 supposed to be kind of a supervisor, kind of a policy makers. We set the policy. We do the
154 regulations and we just follow them, but we don't suppose to interfere on this thing. This what
155 supposed to be done later on. The number of schools is growing. We can't every time hire people
156 and people, leave the schools hire and have a quality insurance system. We need to make sure
157 that we have a quality insurance system that everybody follow it, and to make sure that the
158 quality insurance is respected. That's it.
159 **Researcher**: Regarding the decision making process in the schools if some authorities are
160 devolved to the private schools to make their own decisions, who should have this authority
161 over the private schools? And why?
162 **Interviewee**: Ok, there are usually 6 components in private schools; the ministry, the owner/s or
163 investors, the administration of the school, the parents, the students and definitely the teachers
164 stand there. But what is going on now? Who are presented? Usually the school owners and the
165 administration make school decisions. But later on and this is where we can make quality
166 insurance, we need to involve the parents. That why there is a new regulation. We require each
167 school to have a council of the parents that have a say in the school. This will reduce the tension
168 on us because usually the complaint comes from the parents. But now if the parents are involved
169 in the decision- ma king in the school, we expect less complaint from the parents, but that will be
170 making the school under self-control by the parents.
171 **Researcher**: So do you mean that the owners can participate in the decision- making process as
172 well as the principal and the teachers?
173 **Interviewee**: Yes because the they are investors. This is their money at the end. It doesn't mean
174 that owners interfere in the daily decisions, but , for example, if they want to expand or if they
175 want to reduce the fees or to increase the fees, they must to be there. This is their investment. It
176 is a private school. It is paid by those owners.
177 **Researcher**: Regarding the increasing fees, many schools demand the ministry not to interfere in
178 this issue, what do you think about conferring this authority to the private schools without
179 interfering from the ministry or with specific criteria, for example?
180 **Interviewee**: If there is involvement from the parents, I won't interfere as the ministry. If I make
181 sure the quality is well- maintained and if the parents are involved, then I don't care about the
182 fees because this is the criteria, the quality is maintained and the parents satisfy with that quality.
183 So if these things are working well, then I don't want to interfere because this is business. But at
184 the same time if you can't involve the parents and suddenly make them to pay higher than they

Handwritten margin notes:
- Why they have to get MOE approval?
- Comment [o25]: Areas that the schools could have the flexibility/ shared areas
- After devolution, schools should be followed
- Comment [o26]: The role of the MOE in devolution system
- Comment [o27]: Parental involvement
- financial matters are school owners business
- Comment [o28]: School owner involvement
- Criteria of devolving DM

4

185 expect, at the end the parents take their children from that school and bring them to the
186 government school, and that affects the government school in somehow.
187 **Researcher**: Do you think that training is important for decision makers?
188 **Interviewee**: Training is important for everybody including myself. So definitely because the
189 schools are changing every time. Life is changing. So training supposed to be continuous and
190 self-development.
191 **Researcher**: So what kind of training do you think need to be? Are just courses or there need to
192 be more qualifications to be obtained by decision makers in the private schools?
193 **Interviewee**: It depends what you want from them. For example, if you need them to work in
194 certain thing, you can send them to a professional courses while we need to send them for a PhD
195 if you want them to be a leader with a clear vision. So it depends on what type of task you
196 suppose to give a person.
197 **Researcher**: Thanks a lot for participating with me regarding devolving decision-making in the
198 private schools and if you would like to say something regarding the devolution of decision
199 making to the private schools or any suggestion about the study.
200 **Interviewee**: Thank you. I wish you all the best. I wish you all the best Mahmood.
201 **Researcher**: Thank you.

Comment [o29]: The authority of school fees and the parental involvement

Comment [o30]: Training

Comment [o31]: Kind of training

5

Appendix10: An example of data analysis tables

Mixed themes and categories

Interviewee's key name	Response	Researcher's comments	concepts
T5/ BS23	According to my knowledge, the decisions are centralized from the ministry. Private schools do not have any authority to make decisions. We are not consulted in any decision by the ministry, but we implement decisions made by the ministry. For example, it is not possible to use a school curriculum other than those approved by the Ministry	Centralized system in making private schools' decisions	Decision-making authority
O7/BS41	There is delaying in decision making from the ministry. For example, I sent 4 requests to the MOE to approve the additional building of the school. The first one was before three years, but I have not received the decision of approval. 40-42	Delaying in making private schools' decisions	Time- pressures as constraints on decision-making
MO3	The classification system will help us in many issues. First of all it will help us in the type of authority that we can give, the type of fees, the type of programs and many issues. An A school definitely will be given more freedom to do many things, but again according to certain rules. Compared for D or F schools that need to take care of them in order to grow up to better levels.	Schools should be classified in groups	Classification
O6/ BS2	In general, schools are not consulted in any decision or take their opinion. They do not have any authority in decision- making process. They have to implement the ministry' decisions.	Schools' involvement in decision- making	Decision-making authority
PR16/ MS8	Devolving decision making to the schools authority would enhance the school's level. There will be improvement in the educational process and the school administration will be looking for the best to be applied, which reflects positively on the level of students.	Improvement in education quality	Positive consequences
P5/BS39	School administration stability which is one of the most important criteria that the schools should have because most of the schools suffer from instability and each new administration would like to implement its management way.	School administration should be stable	The criteria of devolving decision-making
O5/MS1	The decision should be chosen by the agreement of all participants in the decision-making process.	School's decisions should be made by the agreement of school	Decisions-making style

Interviewee's key name	Response	Researcher's comments	concepts
		staff and stakeholders	
PR31/ BS6	Decisions are central from the MOE. There is no role from the school administration in DM process, just send their requests to the ministry.	Centralized decisions without involvement from private schools	Decision-making authority
O3/ BS31	The ministry intervenes in case of the school has decided not to transfer the student, whose parents did not pay tuition fees, to another school. The decision here should be for the school. The Ministry has no right to intervene.	-MOE intervention in school fees. -School fees could be devolved	-Constraints on decision-making - Students affairs
T16/ BS19	Flexibility is one of the positive outcomes if decision- making authority will be devolved to the school authority. For example, teachers will have the flexibility to choose the appropriate positive and light punishment to control abnormal students such as sending the student outside the class. Thus, teachers will be more respected by students.	Flexibility in making school decisions	Positive consequences
O5/ MS1	It depends on the kind of the decision. The school owner and the principal should have power in making all of the school's administration decisions because the owner is stable, but the principal might leave the school. However, the school principal play important role in technical decisions such as appointment teachers and choosing school curriculum with senior teachers' participation.	School's decisions should be made by more than one person	Decision-making participants at school level
T3/ BS28	The rules are changing to whom you can appoint and when you can appoint, and the schools are not informed of what are the specific rules. You speak to one official the one day, no you can't appoint this teacher. The next day you go for the same purpose the next official, yes, ok we can approve this teacher.	-miscommunication - Contradiction in regulations	Constraints on decision-making
P6/BS4	The school has to get final approval from the MOE, even for its trip.	MOE is the final decision-maker	Decision-making authority
MO6	Schools might exploit decision-making authority to their own interests, especially if their first aim is profit rather than education. for example, they may recruit weak students and get high marks in school exams particularly if they will be granted the authority of making exams.	Power exploitation	Negative consequences
T2/ BS10	Decision- making could be devolved to all private schools authority, but the ministry should follow them indirectly. The MOE could	Private schools should be followed-up to ensure their decisions	Accountability system

Interviewee's key name	Response	Researcher's comments	concepts
	continue granting decision- making authority to the schools that made the right decisions according to the agreed standard. In contrary, the ministry should stop granting decision- making authority to the school that made the wrong decisions or violated the ministry's rules.	are effective and according to the criteria.	
O5/MS1	It is preferable that the ministry should give decision-making authority of school activities to private schools.	Schools activities could be devolved	General administrative decisions
O10/BS40	In my opinion, the decision should be made collectively and not individually by forming a school board. The decision should be made after consultation with this board, in which everyone should be involved, not only the chairperson of the board should have the power to make the decision. Individual decisions might fail and might not be applied correctly without satisfaction and conviction of implementers.	A school board should be formed and all its members should be involved in making school's decisions	Decisions-making style
PR11/KS6	Parents can be involved in some school decisions because some of them could have experience in the field of decision and contribute excellent ideas, both in the technical aspects, such as curricula or other aspects like activities and school student's meal. Their views in all aspects should be studied by the school administration.	Parental involvement	Decision-making participants
O9/ BS3	There should be coordination and partnership between the MOE and private schools. This could be done by forming committees which have members from the ministry and the schools. The private schools members have a voice representing private schools so that they have a balance.	Local committee should be formed and its members can be from the MOE and different types of private schools	Private schools council
MO5	Decision participants should be trained in order to be familiar with all the issues until the right decision is made. They could have training courses and workshops on how to make decisions and to deal with school problems.	Training courses and workshops are very important to all school staff	Training

Theme: decision- making domains

Interviewee's key name	Response	Researcher's comments	concepts
O14/ BS37	I speak frankly in order to preserve our Islamic and national identity. It is preferable to have the Ministry's control of the national curriculum because it is afraid that Omani children would lose their national, moral and Islamic identity. From my personal view if this authority will be left opened to the private schools, there might be negative outcomes. It depends on the school administration in teaching or not to teach this curriculum. There would be high probability that a school managed by expatriate principal believes there would be no need to teach this Islamic curriculum because the school applies an international curriculum (Internationalism) which is an opened field so that the school could celebrate all religious events of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. Thus, all children should accept that; however, it is difficult to accept that in our country Oman.	- National curriculum should be centralized - Teaching the national curriculum should be centralized	National curriculum Teaching the national curriculum
T14/ BS15	The Ministry must have the authority to determine the age of admission to kindergarten and first grade because some schools may enroll young children who are not fully grown.	Admission age should be centralized	Admission age
P2/ BS42	From my experience as a parent in private schools for five years, the fees are increasing every year, especially the transportation fees are very high. In my view, the ministry should scrutinize this aspect and coordinate with the private schools, so that the final decision of the fees from the ministry and not from the school	The decision of school fees should be shared, but the final decision maker should be the MOE	School fees
PR11/ KS6	It is necessary the decision of the number of students in each classroom should be within the authority of the ministry because some classes are small and some schools may have a large number of students.	Number of students should be centralized	Number of students
MO4	Having a central exam will provide the ministry indication about the level of the students because we measure all standards in the same classes. Also, you can judge this school done well or not because all students have the same exams. So the ministry should have the authority to set the final exam as a bench mark for all the students; and thus, to make sure that the students have the same outcomes.	Setting the final exams should be centralized	Setting final exams

List of Abbreviations

DGPS: Directorate General of Private Schools

GBP: British Pound

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

IB: International Baccalaureate

IELTS: International English Language Testing System

IGCSE: International General Certificate of Secondary Certificate

IT: Information Technology

KG: Kindergarten

MOE: Ministry of Education

MOF: Ministry of Finance

MOI: Ministry of Information

MOMP: Ministry of Manpower

MONE: Ministry of National Economy

NCSI: National Centre for Statistics & Information

OECD: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

PDPS: Policy Document of Private Schools

PIRLS: Progress in International Literacy Study

RO: Omani Rial

ROP: Royal Oman Police

SBM: School-Based Management

TIMMS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

USD: United States Dollar

WB: World Bank

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