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Article

# Female School Leaders' Perceptions and Experiences of Decentralisation and Distributed Leadership in the Tatweer System in Saudi Arabia

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**Abstract:** While school reform has been the subject of much research globally, few studies have examined “on the ground” educational reform in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), especially in relation to the “Tatweer” System, an initiative which purports to transform education and lead educational change within the country. This paper aims to address this knowledge gap and reports on a study which examined female leaders’ perceptions and experiences of the system. A qualitative case study of three Tatweer schools was conducted, with data being drawn from one-on-one interviews (n = 16), focus group interviews (n = 4) and documentary analysis. Our findings suggest that the Tatweer system is what can be termed “semi-decentralised”, which appears to be linked to issues of accountability, trust, and perceived staff competence. However, at the local level, major breakthroughs seem to have taken place in relation to distributing leadership responsibilities and decision-making processes within these female-led schools.

**Keywords:** trust; school reform; autonomy; female leaders

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## 1. Introduction

Improving the quality of, and access to, education is a priority in many developing countries [1] and has been identified as one of the key sustainable development goals by the United Nations [2] as they look to build on the progress achieved through the millennium development goals set in 2000 [3]. In the Arab region where improving the quality of education has long been a key goal [4], much work has begun to progress education chances for young people, with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) being no exception. A key example is the King Abdullah Bin Abdul-Aziz Project, which was initiated in 2007 with the main goal of transforming education. As part of this scheme, the “Tatweer” Programme was set up to upgrade the standards of the country’s educational system (in Arabic, the word “Tatweer” means development). The programme seeks to enhance the professional development of teachers; improve the educational environment; integrate technology and digital models into the curriculum; develop comprehensive curricula to meet students’ cognitive, occupational, emotional, intellectual and well-being needs; strengthen students’ self-capabilities and learning skills creativity; develop their general talents and interests; and deepen their concepts of social and national coherence through extracurricular activities of various types [5]. The Tatweer programme was designed to increase the efficiency of education through reforming systems, processes and roles within schools with a key espoused aim to move from a heavily centralised school governance system towards a more decentralised one. Saudi Arabia has historically had a very centralised education system which, it has been argued, has led to increased bureaucracy, initiative stifling, and a fear of risk-taking [6]. However, one of the purported key features of the Tatweer Programme is that through a process

of decentralisation, key aspects of decision making are delegated to the school level. At the same time, it was claimed that the Tatweer project would allow for more shared and distributed leadership practices to occur in the day to day running of each school. Therefore, the project represents a major shift in educational policy and practice for the country.

Additionally, the introduction of a new school leadership structure, which includes an “Excellence Team”, is a key aspect of the Tatweer school programme. The Excellence Team contains several members of the school community and two external community members from the private sector and is tasked to work collaboratively to improve the school’s performance by determining priorities, setting the targets of the school and ensuring that the vision and mission of the school are met.

Although much has been written about decentralisation elsewhere (see, for example, [7–13]) the educational reform movement in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a relatively recent phenomenon with little systematic evidence of how it is, or is not, working. In fact, the limited previous research in this area has tended to focus on quantitative measures such as attitudinal surveys (see, for example, [14]). Consequently, there is a need for more in-depth research into the programme and how it is perceived and experienced by those who are charged with implementing the changes at the local level [15]. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to address this knowledge gap and report on a study which examined female leaders’ perceptions and experiences of the programme. All schools are segregated by gender in Saudi Arabia and girls’ schools are led by female leaders. As the field researcher was female and had previously taught in the system, it was felt that this would be an appropriate focus for this exploratory study for the following pragmatic and methodological reasons: To allow for ease of access to institutions and to ensure a certain amount of cultural knowledge of the female educational system to help with data collection and analysis. Future in-depth studies are planned in both female and male schools to see whether the findings from this study are indicative of experiences across the sector and to allow for data to be compared and contrasted across the two different types of institutions. Hence, the specific research question addressed in this article is:

*What are female school leaders’ perceptions and experiences of decentralisation and distributed leadership in the Tatweer system in KSA?*

Thus, this article contributes to our understanding of how female school leaders in Saudi Arabia perceive and experience decentralised governance reform in a cultural context that is not widely understood. By drawing on notions of decentralisation and distributed leadership, the article also aims to provide new theoretical insights into how these concepts may help to explain educational reform in an Arab context.

Following this introduction, the paper is organised into four sections. First, we outline our conceptual framework. Next, we describe our methodology and methods. Then, we present our findings and, finally, highlight the implications for practice and future research.

## **2. Conceptual Framework**

In this paper, we are focused on two main concepts: namely, decentralisation and distributed leadership. Here, we use both interconnected ideas as heuristic devices, conceptualise decentralisation as being linked to system level policies and procedures and distributed leadership as being linked to institutional level practices and behaviours, while acknowledging that in reality, such binaries are over-simplistic as there is much overlap between the two.

### *2.1. Decentralisation*

Decentralisation relates to the level of decision-making in a system with the related notion of devolution being linked to political and legal aspects of the process:

Devolution is more than just a provisional delegation of authority to lower levels that can be always taken back, as is usual within business enterprises; it is the lawful transfer of

revenues and responsibilities to sub-national levels: to states or provinces, and counties or municipalities [16].

In educational systems, the level of decision-making can be defined by asking how much autonomy schools have in order to make decisions in relation to staffing, curriculum and strategic planning processes, as Chapman and Miric [4] explain:

Seen by some as a means of improving the responsiveness of schools to their communities, decentralisation can take different forms (e.g. devolution, delegation, deconcentration and privatisation). One essential feature that all of these forms of decentralisation have in common, however, is the progressive delegation of responsibility, and presumably authority, for decisions to lower levels of the education system. Depending on the country, this gives communities more say in the hiring and supervision of teachers, construction and maintenance of facilities, and the ways in which funds are spent ... According to how decentralisation is implemented, it may also give teachers greater control over their own teaching.

The process of decentralisation simultaneously makes public leaders more autonomous and more accountable [16]. In response to the forces of globalization, the concept has become a common option in the policy frameworks of international agencies such as UNESCO and the World Bank. Indeed, as Shields [1] points out, "Nothing better illustrates the globalization of education than the ongoing trend towards the decentralisation of education in many countries".

Most developing countries have been affected by the growth of globalization, and, in response, the majority of developed nations have invested in educational reform [17]. Saudi Arabia is one of the developing countries that has sought to improve its economy by reforming its educational system and has attempted to adopt best practice and models from around the world. Until now, Saudi Arabian schools are well-known for having extremely centralised systems, with top-down decision making, a lack of school autonomy and a great deal of bureaucracy [18–20]. Some authors claim, however, that such centralised systems can have a detrimental effect on staff motivation [12], and it has been argued that allowing educational leaders to have more control over key tasks such as curriculum design is seen as a key aspect of being a professional [21].

There are other various advantages associated with decentralisation in education. The process delegates significant powers from the central government to the local authorities or to stakeholders in schools as well as giving the schools a degree of autonomy in their management and governance [22,23]. It is believed that school autonomy in this level of decision-making will lead to improved quality and better budgetary management. The argument made is that if schools can raise standards and address quality issues independently, this will, in turn, help improve the students' achievement and learning [1,22]. This is a position that is widely held globally. For example, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report in 2011 stated that "at the country level, the greater the number of schools that have the responsibility to define and elaborate their curricula and assessments, the better the performance of the entire school system" [24].

As stated earlier, in the Saudi context, schools are renowned for having extremely centralised systems, with top-down decision making and a lack of school decision-making autonomy. Responding to this, the Tatweer Project aims to transform schools into using bottom-up approaches in its decision-making by converting them into self-evaluation and planning schools [25]. It is argued that self-evaluation is a robust approach that leads to school improvement; evidence from a recent review of literature in this area indicates that schools in many countries that adopt this approach show high levels of student achievement [26]. Thus, it is claimed that empowering school leaders as well as teachers by giving them the authority to control their school will enhance school effectiveness. However, in a country where the education system has historically always been centrally controlled, an optimum balance has to be reached between state-level control and common participation [27], especially when teachers and school leaders may not have the necessary training, skills and experience

to successfully take on these new roles. In this study, therefore, we aim to explore whether this balance has been reached. There are also key issues to be explored relating to the idea of policy borrowing and implementing normative ideas of concepts which have been largely imported from the West (based on research and theory from different educational systems and contexts from, for example, the USA, UK and Australia) and assuming that they can be successfully applied in very diverse cultural and political contexts such as within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

## 2.2. Distributed Leadership

Leadership is an important element to be developed and examined in the educational reform process, and the theory of distributed leadership is one of the most popular in current school leadership and management practices, although it is not without its critics [28,29]. The concept can be defined as viewing leadership as:

A group activity that works through and within relationships, rather than individual action. It emerges from a variety of sources depending on the issue and who has the relevant expertise or creativity [30].

Thus, distributed leadership is considered as inclusive, relational, collaborative and contextually situated. For example, the contribution and participation of parents, teachers, students, local community and governors in leading the school is considered very important [31]. However, it has been argued that in the Saudi context, communities are conservative and may perceive any such change as a threat [4].

In this purportedly democratic approach, the idea is that power and decision-making authority shifts from the Ministry of Education to managers of educational systems, teachers and, eventually, to learners. Furthermore, the power distribution to the lowest levels in the school should be identifiable and reflected in local policies and practice [21]. The challenge facing schools, however, especially in a system that has traditionally been centralised, is to navigate the hierarchical, authoritative and formal leadership patterns to transform their schools into productive communities of learning [32]. It is also problematic to assume that a concept developed in Western contexts can be useful or successful in a very different cultural and political arena. Additionally, there are key issues linked to accountability that need to be considered given the increasing pressure on schools in KSA to perform against globally driven benchmarks. Is true leadership and power distribution possible in such a context, or is it mainly linked to task delegation [33]? Consequently, in this paper, we use distributed leadership as a conceptual framework to help explain and interpret aspects of our data, in line with Diamond and Spillane [34].

## 3. Methods

To address our research question, we undertook an interpretative, qualitative case study of 3 Tatweer girls' schools in KSA. For context, Saudi Arabia has 30,332 schools in total of which 16,496 are girls' schools and 210 designated as Tatweer Schools (across primary, intermediate and secondary stages). Children in Saudi Arabia, generally, are required to attend 6 years of primary, 3 years of intermediate and 3 years of secondary schooling in order to complete their education. Education is free of charge for all students [6]. We interviewed 12 teachers and three head teachers from three secondary girls' schools in Riyadh and interviewed one official of the King Abdullah Project as well as conducting focus group interviews with the Tatweer Unit's members (this unit works on two fronts: first, helping schools to change the culture and practices; second, improving the performance by providing schools with tools, strategies and training), and three Excellence Team members in each of the three Schools. Senior teachers from each school were selected (for example, Head of English, Head of Arabic) because these are new positions associated with the Tatweer Project and it was felt that these participants were likely to provide rich data about the newly implemented system. In line with the

study's research question, all the participants were female; as highlighted earlier, in the country, all schools are single sex.

### 3.1. Data Collection

The study adopted three qualitative data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis. The interview questions were developed through a literature review and after conducting a pilot study. The literature review was conducted in two stages. First, influential academic texts were reviewed to help identify, define and develop the main concepts of globalization, school reform, decentralisation and distributed leadership and place these definitions in a contextual and historical framework. Next, primary research studies dealing with each concept in relation to education were identified for review by searching a range of electronic databases such as, for example, EBSCOhost Electronic Journal Service. In order to allow the review to inform current circumstances and reflect the "contemporary age of education" [35], it was decided to only search for articles published since 1980. In addition, to focus the review, it was decided to only review articles that were linked to schools rather than including articles related to all sectors of education. This decision meant that only articles related to primary and secondary education were included in the review. Data from English-language and Arabic articles were included to reflect research from both a western and non-western cultural perspective. The reference lists in the selected articles were also explored to identify additional articles for inclusion.

The interviews took place in each of the participants' workplace. As highlighted above, four focus groups were also conducted. Three were undertaken with senior leaders in each of the Case Study schools and one with the Tatweer Unit office. Once again, the themes emanated from the literature review and discussions with key stakeholders and covered such areas as levels of autonomy, decision making processes, school cultures, leadership behaviours and what opportunities and challenges there were in implementing the new system. The average length of the interviews and focus groups was approximately 60 min.

To supplement these data and help provide more context, key reports were analysed which identified school challenges, figures, Tatweer Unit matters and plans, meetings, training, professional development, achievements, aspirations, school structures and self-evaluation plans from each school.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

The interviews and focus groups were recorded (in Arabic) and then transcribed. The next step was to translate these data into English. After this process, the translation was checked and the data were analysed. This was achieved using thematic analysis techniques outlined by Lichtman [36] which involved reading and coding each transcript, merging and reflecting on these codes to form larger categories and emerging conceptual themes and then further analysing these themes by comparing and contrasting them to the reviewed literature. The following table outlines a selection of the major themes that emerged from the data which were identified by collating the initial codes into key themes and then reflecting on theory and reviewed literature (see Table 1). As can be seen, many of the themes were common to both concepts, reflecting their interconnected nature.

In addition, these data were supplemented by documentary analysis, as explained earlier.

### 3.3. Ethics

The research presented here was subject to approval from the University of Reading's Research Ethics Committee. In addition, we provided detailed information sheets and consent forms for each participant and, to protect their anonymity, pseudonyms have been used throughout and schools have not been identified.

**Table 1.** Selected emerging themes and concepts.

Themes	Concepts
Recruitment	
Curriculum and assessment	
Team work	
School-based decision making	
Trust and accountability	<i>Decentralisation</i>
Training and professional development	
Perceived ability	
Community involvement	
Excellence team role	
Distributing work	
Distributing responsibilities	
Teacher Professional development	
Self-evaluation and planning	<i>Distributed leadership</i>
Shared decision making	
School restructuring	
Communication	
Community involvement	

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1. Decentralisation in the Tatweer School's System

The findings from this study suggest that while Tatweer schools have been empowered to an extent by being given more opportunities to manage their affairs internally, there still appears to be some way to go. One plausible explanation might be that this is an example of policy cloning or policy borrowing, where the reforms have introduced the rhetoric and veneer of decentralisation and school autonomy, which local leaders have bought into, but existing power and decision-making structures remain largely unchanged. In fact, the participants in the study indicated that the level of decision-making in general is what can be termed “semi-decentralised”. For example, although all participants in this study initially thought that they had more decision-making power in relation to internal school matters (which will be discussed in the next section), when asked about what freedom they had linked to recruiting staff, designing the curriculum and assessing students, they found themselves restricted by strict guidance and regulations from the top. It appears that key decisions such as staff appointments still come from the Civil Service Ministry:

Staff appointment is the duty of the Civil Service Ministry and is not the head teacher's duty (Official, interview).

Although head teachers were not able to directly hire or fire school staff, they all wanted to be able to at least make recommendations and thought that they should be on the appointment panel. For example, the head teacher from School A said:

I want them to ask my opinion when they select someone. Because one of the head teacher's authorities should be to be in the team of interviewing staff, (HT1, interview).

The head teacher from school B also agreed that she could not hire or fire any staff in her school. The only thing that she could do was to acknowledge the need for a certain appointment (HT2, interview). The Tatweer Unit members explained why this was the case:

We could call this school an autonomous school, learning school, school-based decision-making, a development school that can build its capacities from inside ... however, we do not mean autonomous in hiring no, it is never the intent of the Ministry ... (Hayat, TU, focus group).



Alrushdan [37] maintains that such a centralised recruitment approach can result in a lack of teachers in certain locations because of the slow and strict bureaucratic procedures that lead to the final decision being made. In agreement, Coggburn [38] argues that decentralisation in managing human resources would allow managers to make decisions regarding hiring more quick with less red tape and would be more responsive and effective. While this may be so, inequality, favouritism, corruption, tribalism and nepotism are possibly enhanced in decentralised systems regarding recruitment, which can lead to hiring unqualified staff [39]. This tension represents a real challenge for Saudi Arabia in moving to a more decentralised system and may help explain the Ministry's reluctance to devolve recruitment powers to schools at this stage [40].

In addition to recruitment, it appears that the Tatweer schools' curricula are still centrally set, according to all the participants in our study. The perception from participants was that teachers are not regarded by the Ministry as sufficiently qualified yet to enable them to have such responsibility. Although they can make suggestions, schools receive the guidance, curricula and the syllabus from the Ministry of Education that they must adopt and use in their schools. To illustrate this point, the head teacher of school A lamented the fact that they had no freedom when it comes to the designing the curricula, scheduling the timetable or even choosing the topics teachers must cover during the term. Another confirmed:

We just raise our suggestions; we do not intervene in the policy of curricula because there is a committee of curricula development and assessment in the Ministry of Education . . . (HT2, interview).

Confirming the head teachers' perceptions, Tatweer Unit members discussed the fact that they felt that teachers were not sufficiently qualified and would need to have appropriate training to be able to have autonomy in designing the curriculum in their school:

The school can't change the curricula . . . It depends mainly on developing the teacher first to design the curricula, then there would be freedom to devise it individually . . . (Nauf, TU, focus group).

While Tatweer Unit members felt that teachers were not ready to take on this level of responsibility at this stage, there are plans to prepare teachers for this responsibility in the future by using different means, such as intensive training and more robust criteria to employ teachers and retain appropriately qualified staff.

These findings suggest that decentralisation and delegating decision-making processes in the Tatweer system appear to be being implemented in a staged approach, linked to perceived levels of trust and competence of the leaders and staff within the programme and the perceived importance of the task in relation to the country's educational goals.

Another example of this was student assessment, which was similarly controlled as one head teacher explained:

We have clear and explicit guidance to follow, I cannot change it. Anything related to students and their academic achievement, we have to follow it . . . but we can raise our comments (about the curricula) (HT1, interview).

It has been argued that the greater autonomy a school has over designing its curriculum and assessments, the better the performance of the school system [24]. However, our study suggests that there are many contextual and cultural issues that need to be taken into consideration before such a shift in decision making is enacted which are linked to levels of trust, perceived competence, staff training and ability, experience and accountability. Bruns et al. [41] argue that any new reforms must be subjected to rigorous evaluation in relation to cost-effectiveness, accountability and whether the reforms have achieved the desired goal. In this regard, since 2013, the Saudi external body, the Public Education Evaluation Commission, has inspected the work of schools to ensure that they

meet the required targets. As such, there are several processes to hold the performance of Tatweer schools to account. Therefore, central to the Tatweer Project is the notion of accountability whereby school leadership is accountable and responsible in relation to the decision-making process and student performance.

#### 4.2. Distributed leadership in Tatweer schools

In terms of internal decision-making and distributing leadership practices, our data suggest that there was a real sense of collaborative leadership within the female-led case study schools and that this helped with motivation and a feeling of “decision ownership” amongst the staff. One senior teacher stated that:

The head teacher distributes the work . . . and we work together. Our aim is the school; we do not have individual aims . . . The Excellence Team and senior teachers all encourage teamwork (Lati, interview).

The Excellence Team, which contains several members of the school community, appeared to be a crucial part of this process. Its key role is to lead change and maintain sustainable development through leading the self-evaluation of school performance and subsequent planning. One participant explained how the decision-making process worked in her school:

First, we meet as an Excellence Team then discuss the issue . . . and through consultation, the decision is made; no one person can make the decision, and the head teacher cannot enforce her opinion (Asmahan, interview).

Another teacher, who is a member of the Excellence Team, commented:

The Excellence Team members meet together . . . this gives them the chance to discuss, adopt views and decide what they want (Habibah, interview).

Alsaud [42] argues that employee engagement in decision-making increases motivation, as it gives people a sense of contributing to the governance of the organisation. It appears that the formation of the Excellence Team offered a shared and collaborative space for staff to contribute to local decision-making processes and so allowed them to make suggestions and recommendations without fear of reprisal, increasing a sense of trust within the institution.

Another successful innovation within the Tatweer system that emerged from our study is that of the senior teacher, who oversees the continuation of professional development and enhancing student achievement within their disciplines and across the school. The senior teacher is usually responsible for teachers who teach the same discipline. This reflects how Tatweer schools are beginning to distribute leadership internally as senior teachers are now responsible for other teachers’ performance and development, which is an innovation in the country. The number of the senior teachers in each school varies depending on how many teachers they have in the school. Our study found that the head teacher is free to formulate senior teacher positions based on the school’s needs. For instance, the head teacher of school C chose the teacher of history to be a senior teacher for social sciences, while other Tatweer schools in this study did not have a senior teacher in this discipline. Therefore, it appears that these important decisions are being distributed to the head teacher and the school’s individual requirements.

One head teacher believed that the emphasis on continuing professional development (through the leadership of the senior teacher role) is key to the success of the programme:

The Tatweer program has from the beginning been about developing the educational and administrative structures and processes, by training the administrative staff and teachers (HT2, interview).

As Bush and Glover [43] argue, it is impossible for leaders to manage all aspects of their schools. Moreover, differentiating leadership is crucial not only to ensure all leadership activities are being

performed but also that the pool of talent and experience of all the school management team members is employed at the optimum level. As one senior teacher in our study said:

The senior teacher cannot work alone; she must work with her teachers, meeting with them, distributing the work and roles to them (Intisar, interview).

From our data, the new structure of the Tatweer schools in which the head teacher involves the teachers by delegating responsibilities and powers throughout the school was perceived by all participants as being very successful. In addition, the introduction of a governing body, which included the participation of students, parents and other stakeholders, has encouraged the wider community to be involved in each school's activities and decision making. This practice appears to be a major change in local school leadership within the country.

It is clear that this new leadership structure relies on two important teams to lead and manage the school. These are the school board of governors and the Excellence Team. This organisation is very different to the previous organisation of schools in the country in two important aspects: One, the leadership of the school has been distributed into two teams rather than located solely in the hands of the head teacher; and two, the members of the board of governors are drawn from a wide range of representatives both internal and external to the school. As argued earlier, the contribution and participation of parents, teachers, students, peer evaluators, local community and governors in leading the school is considered very important in relation to successful distributed leadership practice [29,31] and our data suggest that this process appears to have been a major success in the case study schools.

## 5. Conclusions

Through three in-depth case studies, this paper sought to explore senior female school leaders' perceptions and experiences of the Tatweer system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia using a conceptual framework based on decentralisation and distributed leadership. Our findings suggest that while certain powers have been delegated to school level, key issues linked to recruitment, curriculum design and implementation, and assessment are still controlled centrally. Thus, we found that the Tatweer system is what we term "semi-decentralised", which appears to be linked to issues of accountability, trust and perceived staff competence. This position may also reflect the short time frame in which these major system changes have been implemented and perhaps suggests more of a gradual process of system reform in relation to decentralisation, with the process evolving through several stages over time rather than an overly simplistic binary model.

At the local level, it is clear that major breakthroughs have taken place in relation to distributing leadership responsibilities and decision-making processes within these female-led schools. Involving staff, students and the local community appears to have empowered teachers and increased motivation levels as well as giving people a feeling of ownership over the education process. These findings bode well for the future development of education within the country.

While the study does not claim to be generalisable, there are three main implications from our work which may help guide future school reform in the country. First, it appears that while decentralisation is a key aim of the system, there is a need to ensure that school leaders have the necessary skills and training to adapt to this cultural shift. Second, while accountability is an understandable concern, there appears to be a need for an increased culture of trust within the system, especially in relation to school leaders' involvement in staff recruitment, curriculum design and implementation, and assessment. Third, giving school leaders freedom at the local level to distribute leadership responsibilities and involve all stakeholders in the school's decision-making processes appears to have been successful and should be encouraged.

This small-scale research project has uncovered some interesting issues in relation to educational reform in Saudi Arabia. However, more research is needed in a wider range of schools, for example, in male and female schools, to see whether the findings presented here are indicative of perceptions and experiences across the country.

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