Leaders as change executors: the impact of leader attitudes to change and change-specific support on followers

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Abstract

Organizational change research has long regarded leaders as instrumental for the successful implementation of change. Leaders, however, are not always initiating change but rather executing it. In those cases, leaders may hold negative attitudes with regards to the change content or even resist change implementation while also being less effective in supporting their followers. This study tests whether, and to what extent, leader attitudes alongside leader change-specific support impact follower resistance to change. Using survey data from school principals and teachers in the public education sector in Germany, findings from multilevel linear

regression show that leader resistance is positively related to follower resistance while leader attitudes to change content are unrelated to follower resistance. Leader change-specific support strengthens the relationship between follower attitudes towards change content and their resistance to change. Thus, this study raises awareness of the negative impact leaders can have on their followers when they are executors rather than initiators of change.

Keywords: leader, followers, resistance, attitudes, externally imposed organizational change.

1. Introduction

Leadership is celebrated as an important factor for the successful implementation of organizational change (Kotter, 1996). Over the past decades, studies have investigated the role of leader attributes such as leader personality and leader behaviour through leadership styles on the extent of which employees buy into change initiatives (Oreg & Berson, 2019). These findings are based on leadership theory indicating that leadership is primarily a process of influence (Hogg, 2001), where leaders can define the meaning of organizational processes and provide their followers with directions for the kind of behaviour that is expected from them (Podolny et al., 2004). This study builds on these findings by capturing the impact of leaders' change-specific support on followers' reactions to change.

Whereas leader attributes play a key role in the understanding of leadership during organizational change, this research stream disregards that leaders themselves may be recipients of change. This possibility is especially salient when leaders are not the initiators of change but rather executors (Heyden et al, 2017), as in cases of externally imposed change. During externally imposed change (e.g., changes in policy or new legislation), the imposing change

agent who is initiating change resides outside the impacted organization. The interests of the outside change agent might not be congruent with those within the organization, who are affected by the change (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2011). In situations of externally imposed change, leaders may have similar reactions to change than their followers compared to situations in which leaders are actively involved in the design of and decision-making process leading up to change. This study, therefore, integrates leader attitudes towards change to capture leaders as recipients and executors of change.

Oftentimes change recipients are exposed to conflicting processes while coping with change (Piderit, 2000). For example, change recipients may be generally supportive of a specific change initiative but may resist its implementation in their work as it may require comprehensive adjustments in work behaviours and routines. Past research predominately focused on the latter—resistance to change implementation—while disregarding the other, more abstract, form of resistance to a specific change, its content, and underlying (normative) connotations—attitudes towards change content.

Combining leader behaviour during change with leader reactions to imposed change, the research question of this study is: Are there separate (indirect) effects of leader attitudes toward change and their change-specific support on follower resistance to change implementation in situations of externally imposed organizational change? Drawing on leadership research and construal level theory, this study develops and tests hypotheses using data collected from elementary school principals and teachers shortly after a major policy change was announced in the public education sector in Germany.

The literature to date has not yet fully disentangled the difference between “leaders of change who are also the initiators of change versus those who implement changes initiated by

others" (Oreg & Berson, 2019, p. 298). The present study contributes to the closure of this research gap by focusing on leaders who are charged with implementing change for which they have not participated in the strategic decision making and initiation processes—change executors (Heyden et al., 2017). Further, resistance to change has predominantly been studied among followers without accounting for the potential effects of leader-follower interactions (Ford et al, 2008; Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009). This article investigates the impact of leader resistance as a potential influencing factor of followers' resistance, enabling a better understanding of the underlying multilevel dynamics in organizations facing change (Bouckenooghe, 2010). Moreover, this study empirically tests the impact of change-specific support leaders provide during change and, therefore, extends previous qualitative research (Levay, 2010) and theorizing (Oreg & Berson, 2019). As such, this study further supports the emerging evidence that leader behaviour may not always be conducive to change implementation when leaders are the executors rather than the initiators of change. Finally, this article proposes and tests the relationship between two related constructs: attitudes towards change content (i.e., how change recipients feel, behave, and think about a specific change, its content, and perceived value) from resistance to change implementation (i.e., how individuals feel, behave, and think about the actual changes in their work). Thus, the present study is in line with calls for a more nuanced view of attitudes toward change that reflects the potential for simultaneously occurring conflicting processes (Piderit, 2000).

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Leader Behaviour and Reactions to Imposed Change

Leaders play a particularly important role as strategic decision-makers (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), effective champions (Oxtoby et al., 2002), and sense-givers during change (Gioia

& Chittipeddi, 1991; Robert & Ola, 2020). In a systematic review of leadership during organizational change, Oreg and Berson (2019) state that previous research has focused on leader attributes (e.g., demographics and personality) and how those relate to the strategic choices leaders make and to leader behaviour. The choices leaders make during the initiation of change and leader behaviour during change subsequently influence followers' beliefs and attitudes (Bass, 1990; Dirks & Ferrin, 2002), such as change commitment (Herold et al., 2008) or resistance to change (Ford et al., 2008).

These relationships are context-dependent, since not all leaders are involved in strategic decision-making. Oreg and Berson (2019) find that "most of the studies we reviewed about the implementation of change are undertaken with the implicit assumption that change leaders fully understand and entirely buy into the change they are implementing, although in reality this is clearly not always the case" (p. 298). This dominant view in previous research neglects the nuanced roles leaders play during organizational change. Heyden and colleagues (2017) propose to differentiate between change initiators, those who identify opportunities for change and engage in planning and decision-making, and change executors, those who realize "change plans through activities such as day-to-day adjustments, rolling out initiatives, aligning activities with stated objectives, translating overarching goals into periodic milestones, and giving sense and direction to change recipients" (p. 962). Their findings show that leaders across the hierarchy can engage in either role, depending on the type of change (Heyden et al., 2017). For example, whether or not proposed changes are imposed or voluntary impacts leaders' roles during change. Voluntary changes are changes that can be implemented at the discretion of the change recipients while imposed changes capture "organizational decisions [that] are dictated and imposed on [change recipients]" (Oreg & Sverdlik, 2011, p. 339).

Initial evidence to support this reasoning comes from education where school principals as leaders tend to be charged with the implementation of change but rarely take part in the strategic decision-making leading up to change (Holmes et al., 2013). Particularly, principals must implement organizational changes, even if they do not support them while persuading teachers about the value of the change (Kondakci et al., 2019). I reason that in situations where leaders are change executors of imposed change, their change-related attitudes and change-specific support will impact their followers' resistance to change implementation (see figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

2.2 Resistance to Change Implementation

Resistance to change is one of the most frequently studied reactions to organizational change (Oreg et al., 2011) and captures the extent of which change recipients resist or support specific change efforts. Resistance to change has been linked to individual and organizational-level outcomes, such as burnout, intentions to leave, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Oreg, 2006; Oreg et al., 2011) and is also a major factor that inhibits change success (Armenakis et al., 1993; Piderit, 2000).

Traditionally, the term resistance to change has been negatively connoted (Ford & Ford, 2010) and was seen as something that has to be overcome (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). However, it is not necessarily bad when change recipients resist organizational change. Particularly, resistance can be seen as an asset that, if used properly, can help mitigate challenges during change implementation (Ford & Ford, 2010; Oreg & Berson, 2019). For instance, Ford and Ford (2010) remind us that "people who are outspoken about their objections to a change proposal are often people who genuinely care about getting things right, and who are close enough to the inner workings of an organization to see the pitfalls in a plan" (p. 30). Research has therefore

engaged in further conceptualizing the resistance to change construct. Pideritt (2000) suggests that resistance to change should be conceptualized as a multidimensional attitude consisting of feelings, thoughts, and behaviours. Building on this conceptual work, Oreg (2006) has defined resistance to change "as a tridimensional (negative) attitude towards change, which includes affective, behavioural, and cognitive components" (p. 76) and proposed a measure for operationalization.

Building on the earlier discussion about leaders as change executors of imposed change, it is likely that both leaders and followers may react to change by holding (negative) attitudes towards change. Most of the literature on reactions to organizational change focuses on the follower perspective (Van Dijk & Van Dick, 2009); the possibility that leaders themselves may react positively or negatively to change has received only some attention. In a conceptual article, Ford and colleagues (2008) define leader resistance as the possibility that leaders may resist ideas and proposals presented by followers. These authors pay attention to the multiple roles of leaders during change, which is important to understand the dynamics in organizations during change. However, Ford and colleagues' (2008) notion of leader resistance focuses on 'bottom-up' initiatives started by followers. It is unclear how leader resistance impacts followers in cases of externally imposed change. Further, in a qualitative study among principals and teachers, Arar and colleagues (2019) found that principals resisted change because they perceived the support for change implementation as inadequate. Rubin and colleagues (2009) in a quantitative study in the manufacturing context incorporated both leader and follower information to capture the impact of leader cynicism, an attitude encompassing contempt, frustration, and distrust towards change, on followers. Findings showed that followers with a highly cynical leader were more likely to report increased cynicism.

As leaders provide followers with a reference point for their own actions (Smircich & Morgan, 1982) and since leader attitudes can significantly influence follower attitudes (Bass, 1990; Rubin et al., 2009), leaders who resist change implementation may express their resistance in daily organizational life and—through their cognition, affect, and/or behaviour—provide followers with signals for their expected support or opposition to change implementation.

H1: Leader resistance to change implementation is positively related to follower resistance to change implementation.

2.3 Attitudes towards Change Content and Resistance to Change Implementation

Dent and Goldberg (1999) argue "people do *not* resist change, per se" (italics in the original, p. 26) but rather resist the expected consequences of change implementation such as changes in one's work environment, loss of status, or loss of comfort. Even though people may not resist change per se, how they perceive the specific change does matter (Lau & Woodman, 1995). Lau and Woodman (1995) argue that employees can simultaneously support the idea behind a change initiative while resisting concrete changes that require them to adjust their work behaviours and routines. For instance, individuals may support the idea of a certain policy such as inclusive education (as in the present study, see context) but resist its implementation, because the implementation brings along changes that personally affect them and their work. A similar argument has been made by Lamm and Gordon (2010), who stated that "individuals may view overall change positively whereas certain changes, issues, or contexts may elicit negative responses" (p. 426). The present study investigates attitudes towards change content—a specific change, its content, and underlying (normative) connotations which corresponds to the 'what' of every change initiative (Self et al., 2007) and resistance to change implementation—the impact of a change initiative on individuals (Self et al., 2007).

Construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) provides a second way to think about the two closely related but distinct sets of attitudes. Construal level theory describes the relationship in terms of psychological distance from an object on two different levels: High-level construals are characterized as relatively abstract and more distant, whereas low-level construals are described as more concrete and less distant. As indicated earlier, attitudes towards change content are more abstract capturing the general, normative connotations of the change and what it stands for, whereas resistance to change implementation relates to the consequences of the change once adopted, thus, being more specific and tangible. A similar argument has been made by Chen and Wiesenfeld (manuscript in preparation as cited in Wiesenfeld et al., 2017), who test the application of construal level theory during organizational change by relating high-level construals to the overarching goals of the change and low-level construals to the implementation of the change.

Trope and Liberman (2010) specify the relationship between low- and high-level construals as "the meaning of low-level features depends on high-level features more than vice versa" (p. 441). Applied to the context of the present study, attitudes toward change content are conceptualized as an antecedent for resistance to change implementation on the follower level (see figure 1). Similarly, from an organizational change perspective, attitudes toward change content might manifest before specific changes in the work environment occur given the time lag between announcement and implementation of the change. This is especially salient in cases of externally imposed change such as changes in public policy (Kuipers et al., 2014). Given the public policy process, new initiatives have been discussed by lawmakers and publicized well before implementation. In cases of externally imposed change, attitudes toward change content

may develop and manifest for leaders and followers independently, well before the actual implementation of the change in the organization.

Building on the argument that attitudes toward change content may develop independently for leaders and followers, and following leadership theory and research suggesting that leaders provide important signals for followers during the implementation of change (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Oreg & Berson, 2011), leader attitudes toward change content may impact followers' intentions to resist change implementation. Particularly, leader attitudes towards change content are likely to affect how change is implemented in the organization through their actions and communication, which then impacts how followers perceive and intend to react to change (Berson & Halevy, 2014).

H2: Leader's positive attitudes toward change content are negatively related to follower resistance to change implementation.

2.4 Moderating Role of Leader Change-specific Support

Aside from their attitudes towards change content and resistance to change implementation, leaders may, directly and indirectly, impact followers through their behaviour during organizational change (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Alongside effective communication and enabling follower involvement in decision-making, leaders shape follower responses to organizational change through the former's supportive leadership behavior (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Previous literature has predominantly investigated the impact of certain leadership styles (e.g., transformational or charismatic leadership) on employee reactions to change; only some studies have considered leadership behaviour in the context of a specific change.

Leader change-specific support is defined as "distinct from a general supportive atmosphere […] and refers to specific support that is provided as part of the change

implementation" (Oreg et al., 2011, p. 492). Studies capturing change-specific support indicate that change recipients are more likely to buy in to proposed changes when they perceive support to be adequate (Armenakis et al., 2007; Straatmann et al., 2016). Leader change-specific support is generally positively correlated with follower change commitment (Herold et al., 2008; Nohe et al., 2013) and negatively with resistance to change (Vos & Rupert, 2017). Vos and Rupert (2017) disentangle the impact of different types of leader behaviour, including change-specific leader support, which they label shaping behaviour, on follower resistance. However, contrary to their expectation, leader change-specific support does not have a direct impact on follower resistance. Similarly, others find no direct relationship and, therefore, proposed to study leader change-specific support as a moderator. For instance, Herold and colleagues (2008) find that the extent of change-specific leadership impacts the transformational leadership – change commitment relationship. In cases of high change-specific support, transformational leadership matters less as compared to situations of low change-specific support.

Given this evidence, one may expect the greatest resistance to the implementation of change among those followers who hold negative attitudes towards the change content while also faced with a leader that shows low levels of support during the change. Conversely, one would expect the lowest level of resistance among those followers who hold positive attitudes towards the change content while having high levels of change-specific support from their leader.

Previous studies, however, have only focussed on change-specific leader behaviour when leaders were change initiators. It is unclear if these previously established relationships hold in the context of externally imposed change in which leaders are executing rather than initiating change. Does leader change-specific support matter in the context of exposed change?

There is some early evidence from a qualitative study that hints towards an answer to this question. Using historical case study methodology in the context of a Scandinavian university hospital, Levay (2010) investigates an organizational change that was not initiated by the leaders yet that threatened "core values and beliefs" (p. 140). Findings indeed indicate that leaders resisted change as opposed to being champions of change. Oreg and Berson (2019) in their systematic literature review on change leadership reason that since "the change [as reported in Levay (2010)] was initiated from outside [the leaders'] departments and that they identified with their subordinates, who resisted the change early on, drove them to use their influence toward the increase rather than alleviation of their subordinates resistance" (p. 287).

Following this early evidence from imposed change, leader change-specific support may not have the expected supportive effect, but rather increase follower resistance to change implementation. Specifically, high levels of leader change-specific support will strengthen the relationship between followers' positive attitudes towards change content and resistance to change implementation, making this relationship more negative. Consequently, low levels of leader support will weaken the relationship between followers' positive attitudes towards change content and resistance to change implementation, making this relationship less negative.

> *H3: Leader change-specific support moderates the negative relationship between follower attitudes to change content and resistance to change implementation. That is, follower (positive) attitudes to change content will be more negatively related to follower resistance to change implementation when leader change-specific support is high and less negatively related to follower resistance to change implementation when change-specific support is low.*

3. Methods

3.1 The Study Setting

The present study focuses on a large-scale policy change in the German education sector—the implementation of inclusive education. Inclusion implies the reorganization of mainstream schooling and emphasizes that schools should accommodate all children regardless of differences arising from ability, ethnicity, culture, and religion ensuring comprehensive participation in society (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Before the ratification of the UN-Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the German education system was one of the most segregated in the world, therefore, the implementation of inclusive education is regarded as a paradigm shift (Powell, 2015) and can thus be conceptualized as major, externally imposed, organizational change (O'Brien & O'Brien, 1995).

Although inclusive education has benefits for children with and without special needs, its implementation poses significant challenges for schools and their employees (Scruggs et al., 2007) leading to profound alterations of teachers' job characteristics (Walk & Beck, 2016). For example, general education teachers often feel unprepared to educate children with special needs as their education provided little, if any, training in special needs (Polly & Hannafin, 2011). Special education teachers are well equipped to work with special needs children but are sent to newly inclusive schools, where they mainly work with individual students and only occasionally teach a class. Given the profound changes to their work and job characteristics, teachers of both groups may resist specific changes posed by the implementation of inclusion. Simultaneously, teachers may be supportive of the change content as inclusion allows all children equal participation in common school settings regardless of their abilities (Grenfell, 2013). Indeed, research indicates that a majority of teachers have positive attitudes toward inclusion (Leyser et

al., 1994), however, teachers are more critical with regards to the specific changes brought by the implementation of inclusive education (Walk & Beck, 2016).

Principals play a strategically important role in shaping the school's vision, while being highly involved in day-to-day administrative procedures (Ingersoll, 2003). Principals are also important during organizational change since their actions directly influence school improvement (Fullan, 2002). Particularly, principals are essential in managing and coordinating resources, motivating and developing teachers, monitoring change implementation, and in strengthening a common school culture (Granados & Kruse, 2011). However, principals are also on the receiving end of leadership from school boards and other education authorities and, thus, have a mandate to implement change in schools (Avissar et al., 2003). Specifically, principals "sit atop a school hierarchy, yet they are responsible for implementing policy mandates received from above [and are] expected to shape school culture in ways that take local experiences into account and at the same time to facilitate policies that they have not chosen" (Flessa, 2012, p. 332). Principals, therefore, have a key position to promote or block change initiatives (Fullan 2002). Research finds that principals regard "too many externally imposed changes in policy and practice as unnecessary and [interfering] with school-based change initiatives" (Starr, 2011, p. 652). Given this context, the case of inclusive education lends itself well to study the research question.

3.2 Data Collection and Sample

Longitudinal mixed methods research is suggested to capture complex relationships during organizational change (Lofquist & Isaksen, 2019). The present study is part of a larger research project focussing on the implementation of inclusive education in Lower Saxony (policy was announced in 2012 and implementation started in the academic year 2013/2014), for which we adopted a nested, sequential, mixed-methods design (Small, 2011). First, qualitative data

from 20 in-depth interviews with teachers and principals employed by schools impacted by the change were conducted before the change implementation began. Interview data consisted of the lived experiences, concerns, and attitudes of change recipients and was used to develop a survey instrument to collect the data used in this article. Findings from the qualitative data indicate that teachers and principals generally hold positive attitudes towards inclusion–the change content but shared less positive attitudes when referring to change implementation (citation redacted). Notably, principals' and teachers' accounts did not significantly differ from each other; rather, both groups used similar terms to describe their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors towards the change content and the implementation of change.

A census approach was used as sampling strategy to collect quantitative survey data, which forms the data source for this article. All principals and teachers of 111 elementary schools in one city and district in Lower Saxony, Germany were invited to take the survey (administrated as paper and pencil survey). In total, 489 teachers from 71 schools and 54 principals participated (no information on the total number of teachers was available to calculate response rates). Aside from some measures that were developed for the study, the survey consisted mostly of reliable and valid instruments to operationalize the constructs of interest and an open-ended question allowing respondents to elaborate on their answers and share other thoughts.

3.3 Variables[1]

The author translated the scales used to operationalize the attitudinal constructs from English into German before an independent translating agency, blind to the objectives of the study, back-translated them into English. Members of the extended research team discussed both versions and resolved the few occurring differences. Unless otherwise noted, participants were

asked to indicate the degree to which they agree or disagree with each statement on a six-point Likert rating scale (1-strongly disagree to 6-strongly agree). Items capturing the main variables of interest are listed in Appendix 2.

Resistance to Change Implementation was measured using the Change Attitude Scale, a 15-item scale, capturing respondents' (negative) affective, behavioural, and cognitive responses to change (Oreg, 2006). Where appropriate, item stems were adapted to reflect the implementation of the specific change. The affective component consists of positive and negative feelings toward the specific change (e.g., *'I had a bad feeling about the implementation of inclusion'*). Behavioural items assess individuals' actions against or in support of the change (e.g., *'I looked for ways to prevent the implementation of inclusion'*). Cognitive items involve individuals' evaluation of the potential benefits and value of the change (e.g., *'I believed that the implementation of inclusion would make my job harder'*). One item that was negatively worded in the original version was reworded to be positive *(e.g., 'I think it is positive that we are going through this change'*). Four items on the cognitive dimension and one item on the behavioural and attitudinal dimensions were reverse-scored before analysis so all items reflect resistance (negative attitudes). Responses were aggregated to a single resistance score. Internal consistency was α=.91 for teachers and α=.85 for principals.

Attitudes towards Change Content was operationalized using the Multidimensional Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale (Mahat, 2008). This 18-item scale measures affective, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of attitudes towards inclusive education, including aspects of physical, social, and curricular inclusion. The cognitive dimension reflects perceptions, beliefs, or opinions about inclusive education (e.g., *'I believe that an inclusive school is one that permits academic progression of all students regardless of their ability'*). The

affective dimension captures emotions about inclusive education (e.g., *'I am disconcerted that students with a disability are included in the regular classroom, regardless of the severity of the disability'*). The behavioural dimension reflects the intention to act in inclusive settings (e.g., *'I am willing to encourage students with a disability to participate in all social activities in the general classroom'*). All negatively worded items were revalenced such as that higher scores on the scale reflect more positive attitudes. All items were aggregated to a single score. The internal consistency of the scale was α=.89 for teachers and α=.85 for principals.

Leader Change-specific Support was developed for the present study. Principals were asked to respond to 12 items capturing their supportive behaviours during change implementation following a prompt "We would like to learn how you structured the implementation of inclusion for your employees". One sample items reads: "*I have talked to my employees about their worries*". Exploratory common factor analysis (Fabrigar et al., 1999) suggested a one-factor model. Salience was found for 7 of the 12 items and achieved internal consistency of α=.85.

Control Variables are theoretically related to the dependent or independent variables (Becker, 2005). Particularly, *leader tenure* (years at current school) was included given the relationship between leader tenure and follower resistance to change implementation (Oreg & Berson, 2011). *Inclusion rate* (ratio of the number of children with special needs to the total number of children in school) was calculated to account for the implementation progress. Principals' and teachers' *gender* (1=female, 0=male) and *age* was controlled for, given established relationships between teachers' demographics and attitudes toward inclusion (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002) and between leaders' demographics and followers' resistance to change implementation (Oreg & Berson, 2011). A measure of *profession* (general education = 1,

special education = 0) was included because special education training is related to having more positive attitudes toward inclusion (Weisel & Dror, 2006).

Aside from the core constructs that were operationalized on the survey, the survey contained an open-ended question in which respondents were asked "Is there anything regarding the topic of inclusion that is important to you?" These responses are used to further contextualize the quantitative findings.

3.4 Analysis

Confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to investigate whether attitudes towards change content and resistance to change implementation are distinct constructs. Findings indicate that the affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions are loading on their respective latent construct (p<.0001). The overall fit was acceptable (SRMR=.074 and CFI=.908) to satisfactory (RMSEA=.163 and TLI=.827), depending on the fit statistics considered. Even though the model fit fell short of some suggested criteria for good fit (Schreiber et al., 2006), a poorer fit was reached by an alternative one-factor model (CFI=.886, TLI=.810, RMSEA=.171, SRMR=.074).

Hypotheses were tested using multilevel linear regression given the nested structure of the data. Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation was used because it produces estimates that are asymptotically efficient and consistent (Hox, 2010). Independent variables were grand-mean centered to facilitate interpretation of the coefficients. Level-2 (leader) predictors were grand-mean centered. Two different centering methods for teachers' attitudes towards change content were applied (Enders & Tofighi, 2007; Aguinis et al., 2013). It was grand-mean centered to test hypotheses 1 and 2. The interaction term was created based on the group-mean centered attitudes towards change content variable to test the moderation effect in hypothesis 3. Analyses were done using Stata 15.

Responses to the open-ended question were analyzed inductively. First, I read through the responses and coded them by using terms close to the respondents' descriptions (e.g., 'inclusion is a wonderful idea', 'the implementation is a cost-cutting approach', 'politicians make decisions without consulting us'). Second, I used those first-order codes to aggregate them into larger themes (e.g., attitudes towards inclusion, attitudes towards the implementation of inclusion, and perceptions of imposed change).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Using school-level identifiers, 399 teachers could be matched to the 54 principal surveys[2]. The number of teachers per school varies from 2 to 21 with an average size of 7.41. Most principals (69%) and teachers (93%) were female and had an average age of 52 (SD=9.16) and 46 (SD=10.04) respectively. The average tenure for principals was 14 years (SD=11.43) and 10 years (SD=8.34) for teachers.

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics and correlations. Mean scores for resistance to change implementation (F: M=3.59, SD=.84; L: M=3.23, SD=.75) and attitudes towards change content (F: M=4.15, SD=.73; L: M=4.56, SD=.63) were similar for leaders (principals) and followers (teachers). The two constructs are highly negatively correlated (F: r=-.73, $p\leq$.0001; L: r=-.51, $p\leq$.0001), but tests for multicollinearity using the variance inflation factor (available upon request) were unproblematic (Hair et al., 2006). This negative relationship indicates that the more positive attitudes of leaders and followers regarding the content of the change (i.e., the movement towards inclusive education), the less likely they are to resist change implementation. Leader attitudes towards change content is also positively correlated to their change-specific support (r=.47, p=.002), but not their resistance to change implementation.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

4.2 Multilevel Linear Regression

In the null model (step 1), the mean follower resistance to change implementation (across schools) is estimated as 3.57 + μ_{0j} , where μ_{0j} is the school residual. A school with $\mu_{0j} > 0$ has a mean that is higher than average, while $\mu_{0j} < 0$ for a below-average school. The between-school (L2) variance in follower resistance to change implementation is estimated as $\widehat{\sigma_{u0}^2}$=.0944, and the within-school between follower (L1) variance is estimated as $\widehat{\sigma_e^2}$=.6016. Thus, the total variance is .6960. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) indicated that 13.56% of the variance in follower resistance to change implementation can be attributed to differences between schools (see table 2).

Step 2 adds the level-1 explanatory variables to the model. Age as a control variable has a negative relationship to resistance to change implementation (γ =-.009; *p*=.0009). Follower attitudes towards change content is negatively related to resistance to change implementation (γ =-.84; $p \leq .0001$). Step 3 shows the relationship between leader attitudes towards change content and their resistance to change on follower resistance to change. As hypothesized (H1), there is a significant positive relationship (γ =.19; *p*=.002), indicating that the higher leaders' resistance intentions, the higher followers' resistance intentions. Hypothesis 2, testing the relationship between leader attitudes towards change content and follower resistance to change implementation, is in the opposite direction than anticipated and only marginally statistically significant (γ =.20; *p*=.053, *p*=.063 in the final model). Step 4 tests a random slope; the variance of slopes across schools is close to zero. The deviance scores are identical (5 decimals), which indicates to favour the model in step 3 (Hox, 2010). In the final model (step 5), the cross-level

interaction between leader change-specific support and follower attitudes towards change content was added. The interaction term is statistically significant and negative (γ =-.24; p=0.006) indicating that leader change-specific support moderates the relationship between follower attitudes to change content and their intention to resist the specific change; therefore hypothesis 3 was supported. The deviance score suggests that the full model fits the data best (deviance=316.29)[3].

[INSERT TABLE 2]

Specific values for (centered) leader change-specific support (1 SD below/above the mean) were chosen to assess the effect of attitudes towards change content on follower resistance to change implementation (Preacher et al., 2006). Figure 2 displays follower resistance to change on the y-axis and their attitudes towards change content on the x-axis. As leader change-specific support increases, the slope relating attitudes towards change content to resistance becomes more negative. The simple slope is -0.6041 at -1 SD (p=.0061, significant) and -0.9721 at +1 SD (p<.0001, significant). The region of significance on the moderator—leader change-specific support—ranges from -.9914 to 2.706 indicating that simple slopes inside this region are statistically significant. Centered leader change-specific support ranges from min -1.2695 to 1.4447. Thus, low levels of leader support fall outside this region; the effect of follower attitudes towards change content on resistance to change implementation is not significant for relatively low observed values of leader change-specific support. This is the case for about 15% of the sample.

[INSERT FIGURE 2]

4.3 Qualitative Findings

Over half (51.5%) of the teachers and 48.1% of the principals used the opportunity to share additional thoughts about the change. I focus here on their attitudes towards inclusion, attitudes towards the implementation of inclusion, and their views on the imposed nature of the change. Like findings from the qualitative data collected before change implementation (citation redacted), respondents differentiated between their views about the change itself and its implementation. For instance, one principal shared that "Leadership and teaching staff are supporting and completely accepting inclusion—the idea of inclusion. But it does not work given the conditions". Another principal mentioned, "Inclusion is generally positive, but the support is lacking in many areas". Teachers' accounts were very similar. One teacher wrote: "The idea is good in theory, but difficult to implement into practice given the current personnel shortages/support." Another teacher indicated, "The difference between the idea, the goals of inclusion and the current implementation is very stark. It is becoming increasingly difficult to defend the ideal [of inclusion]". Similarly, another teacher mentioned, "I am convinced that inclusion is the right way. I am afraid of the conditions under which inclusion has to happen". The excerpts presented here are from principals and teachers in different schools, yet their similarity is striking. Teachers and principals shared positive attitudes towards inclusion—the content of the change while having more negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusion. Respondents also touched on the notion of imposed change. One principal was "sad that politicians are haphazardly implementing changes without recognizing and integrating the expertise of teachers with years of practice". One teacher indicated that it is "a pity that inclusion is imposed" while another shared that "decisions are often made 'at the green table' [English: armchair decisions], which teachers are not a part of and consequently those are not

implementable in practice". These findings support previous findings (citation redacted) and increase the confidence in the operationalization of the constructs in the present study.

5. Discussion

The present study investigated whether and to what extent leader attitudes towards change content, their resistance to change implementation, and their change-specific support impact follower resistance to change following a large-scale policy change in the German education sector. Findings support the claim that follower resistance to change implementation does not occur (fully) independent from the specific leader. This confirms prior research claiming the importance of leaders during organizational change (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Oreg & Berson, 2011, 2019; Vos & Rupert, 2017). The findings extend previous research since leaders were change executors and thus, recipients of change, who resisted when faced with externally imposed organizational change.

Specifically, and similar to previous research on the impact of leader cynicism on follower cynicism (Rubin et al., 2009), findings indicate a positive relationship between leader and follower resistance to change implementation. Leader resistance to change might be especially important to consider in cases where changes are externally imposed since leaders in these situations are change executors (rather than initiators) and tend not to take part in decision-making processes leading up to change (Heyden et al., 2017; Oreg & Sverdlik, 2011). In the specific situation, the interest of the German government instituting the inclusion policy might not match the interests of the schools that have to execute its implementation. Given the setting of the present study, it becomes clear that leader buy-in is as important as follower buy-in. Future research focussing on externally imposed change might incorporate measures of leader resistance

to change implementation alongside measures of leader attributes and behaviour (Oreg & Berson, 2019).

Hypothesis 2, the relationship between leader attitudes towards change content and follower resistance to change implementation, was not confirmed. The directionality of the (marginally significant) coefficient was negative, indicating that teachers displayed higher levels of resistance to change implementation in schools where principals had more positive views of inclusive education. Since final conclusions cannot be drawn from the present study, future studies should further probe leaders' attitudes towards change content and their impact on follower reactions to change.

The hypothesized moderation effect of leader change-specific support on the relationship between follower attitudes towards change content and their resistance to change was confirmed. Leaders' supportive behaviour did not mitigate but rather worsened the relationship between follower attitudes towards change content and their resistance to change implementation. This supports emerging research (Lavay, 2010) and theorizing (Oreg & Berson, 2019) and speaks to previous research indicating that "employees are not resistant to change by default; but they may vary in their responses to roles played by [leaders] in organizational change" (Heyden et al., 2017, p. 976). As such, the present study adds to the emerging research on leaders as contributors to follower resistance to change (Vos & Rupert, 2017). Given this evidence, future research should be mindful of the roles leaders have leading up to and during change implementation and intentionally design studies to account for this underlying, yet understudied mechanism.

5.1 Strengths and Limitations

The present study has distinct strengths. The findings call attention to the need for a more nuanced focus on resistance to change that will help to explain unintended behaviours, especially

regarding the interactions between leaders and followers. Previous research predominantly focused on leaders' attributes such as values or personal orientation towards change (Oreg, 2006; Oreg & Berson, 2011), or their leadership behaviour in form of leadership styles (Herold et al., 2008), but—following conceptual claims (Ford et al., 2008)—the findings of the present study indicate that leader resistance to change implementation—a measure of attitudes—provide valuable insights, particularly in cases of externally imposed change. Further, the present study uses leader change-specific support to capture leader behaviour, an influential factor in follower reactions to organizational change (Oreg & Berson, 2019). Findings support previous studies indicating the indirect rather than direct effect of change-specific leader behaviour on change recipient reactions to change (Herold et al., 2008). Specifically, findings show that leader support indirectly increases follower resistance to change. Further, the present study shows the value of construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) in the context of organizational change. Particularly, by drawing on both the more distant attitudes towards change content construct alongside the less distant resistance to change implementation construct, the present study provides a more nuanced and multidimensional view on reactions to change (Bouckenooghe 2010, Piderit 2000). Further, this research highlights the importance to study organizational change in schools. Teachers, in fact, are also employees in organizations (Ingersoll, 2003) and "similar to workers, foremen and superordinates in a firm" (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 186). Schools can be characterized as "the epitome of top-down, overly controlled, centralized bureaucracies" (Ingersoll, 1993, p. 82) and are, as such, similar to other organizations. Given the size of the education sector in many countries, and the fact that schools frequently face externally imposed change given their public nature (e.g., improving quality of education, pandemic-related changes, increased teacher accountability), it is notable that organizational change research in the school

context has mostly been the focus of education scholars (e.g., Holmes et al. 2013; Flessa, 2012; Fullan, 2002). The present study, alongside others (Oreg & Berson, 2011), shows that schools as organizations and workplaces are intriguing settings to study organizational change. Moreover, aside from the school context per se, studying organizational change across schools removes many threats of confounding (Oreg & Berson, 2011). Schools, through their uniform set up and structure, are simultaneously affected by the same change, and thus, provide a valuable setting to study organizational change. Previous studies of organizational change tend to focus on single organizations (van Dam et al., 2008) or study different changes across organizations (Herold et al., 2008). Finally, the present study adds to the emerging research on change leadership in the public sector (van der Voet, 2014).

Despite those strengths, the present study is not without limitations. The present study may have limitations with regards to internal validity. This study did not capture the interactive and socially constructed nature of resistance to change where leaders may impact followers, but followers can also impact leaders (Ford et al., 2008). Rather, the present study tested the impact of leader attitudes on followers' resistance to change. Related, the cross-sectional data do not allow to properly establish a causal relationship between leader attitudes and follower resistance to change. Future studies may conduct longitudinal research to mitigate these issues to fully disentangle the relationship and directionality between leader and follower resistance to change and to enhance internal validity. Furthermore, there may be other factors that potentially impact the hypothesized relationships but that were not captured on the survey. For instance, previous research finds that personality and dispositional resistance to change can impact how change recipients react to organizational change (Oreg, 2006; Judge et al., 1999). Thus, future studies should incorporate personality or dispositional resistance to change alongside attitudinal

measures. Moreover, given that the data stem from one source, future research should capture actual behaviour (e.g., performance evaluations, student behaviour) separately from survey data to further strengthen the implications of the findings and to further mitigate the risk of common method bias. Another limitation concerns external validity. The sample, while representative of one city and district, might have limited generalizability to other areas in Germany, since education is a responsibility of the state, or even other countries. As discussed earlier, the school context lends itself well to study the same change across multiple organizations given their uniform set up and structure. As such, findings of this work should be replicable in schools located in other parts of the Germany or even internationally. Since the studied variables are relevant to other organizational types or sectors, generalizability could also be enhanced by replicating this work outside the education context. For instance, a setting where these findings may be replicated is in the context of multisite nonprofit organizations. Like schools, affiliates of multisite nonprofits are largely independent from their central offices, yet under the oversight of those in cases of large-scale or system-wide organizational change (Meyer, 2021).

5.2 Implications for Practice

Leading change is a complex undertaking. Findings show that leaders faced with imposed change should be mindful of their role as change executors and concurrent ability to shape change. Being aware of their own reactions to change and supportive behaviour may mitigate the (potential) negative impact they have on their followers. Moreover, leaders need to be cognizant about their follower attitudes; followers' thoughts, feelings, and intentions to act with regards to a specific change may not necessarily be aligned with their feelings, thoughts, and behaviours in response to the implementation of specific changes in their work environment. Imposing agents can also learn from these findings; specifically, imposing agents should be mindful of the

consequences of the act of imposition that seem to lead leaders to resist change and display less effective leadership behaviours.

6. Conclusion

Organizational changes are part of daily organizational life. Successful implementation of change works most effectively where individuals support the change efforts. The present study sheds light on previously under-explored influences of leader resistance on followers during a large-scale organizational change in the education context, while clarifying that leader behaviour during change may vary depending on their role during change initiation and execution. As such, the present study raises the awareness of the potential negative effects of leader support on followers' resistance to organizational change. Getting followers and leaders to buy into changes might be a more complicated story and needs special attention and critical reflection in the implementation process.

Notes

[1] Please consider Appendix 1 with an explanation of a mislabelling issue and mitigation strategies on the leader survey instrument.

[2] Power analysis, adjusted for the non-independence of the data, was conducted prior to data collection. Results indicate a level-2 sample size of n=50 to achieve a medium effect size (|r| =.10 and .25) with power of .80 and significance level of .05 (available upon request). Research has pointed to a minimum number of 40 clusters necessary to detect large structural paths at the between (i.e., school) level (Meuleman & Billiet, 2009) and 50 clusters that are required for Maximum Likelihood estimation (Muthén, 1989).

[3] Missing data were imputed using multiple imputation with chained equations on the transformed variables (Goldstein et al., 2014; Von Hippel, 2009). All three strategies (accounting

for clustering, flat imputation, independent imputation), produce results that were highly similar to those obtained with listwise deletion, providing evidence for the robustness of the findings (analyses upon request).

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Figure 1: Research Model and Overview of Hypotheses

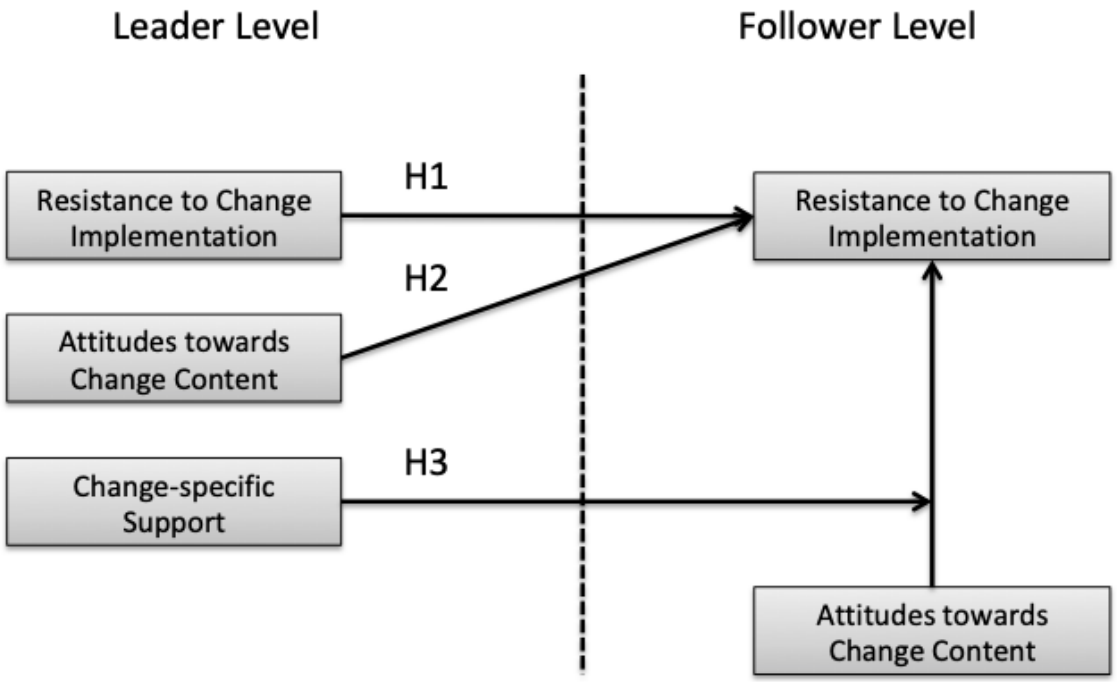
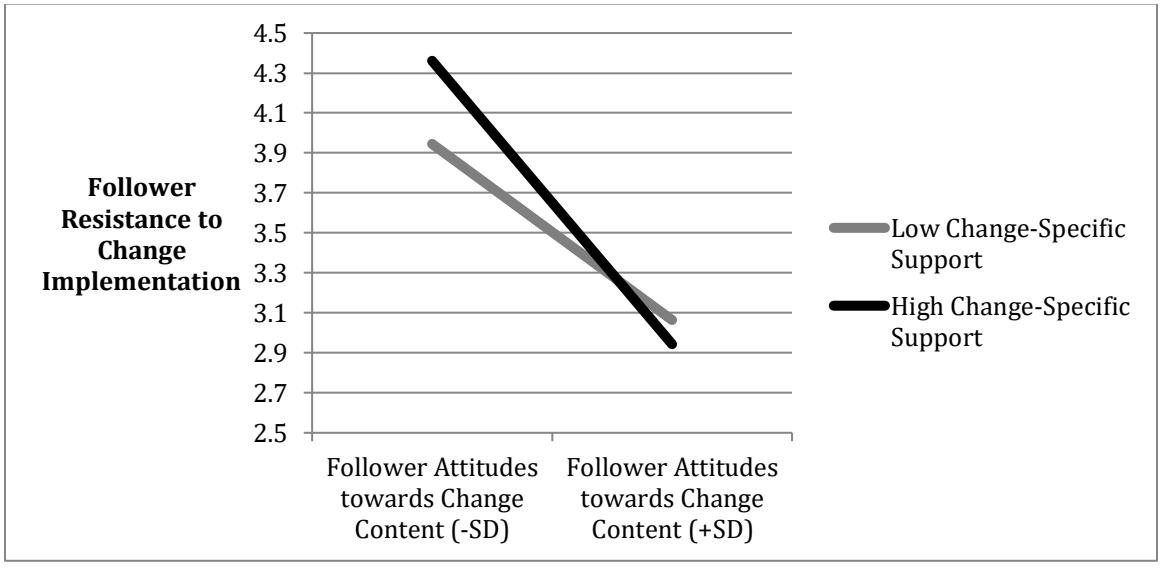


Figure 2: Moderating Role of Leader Change-specific Support



Note: y-axis shortened to facilitate presentation.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

	n	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level-1 (Follower) variables									
1. Profession (1= general education)	389	0.88	0.32	1					
2. Gender (female=1)	382	0.93	0.25	0.07	1				
3. Age	363	46.12	10.04	0	-0.02	1			
4. Attitudes towards change content	312	2.85	0.73	-.36****	0.01	0.00	1		
5. Resistance to change implementation	338	3.59	0.84	.28****	0	-.13*	-.73****	1	
Level-2 (Leader) variables									
1. Gender (female=1)	54	0.69	0.47	1					
2. Age	54	52.43	8.83	0.03	1				
3. Tenure	54	14.31	11.84	0.06	.66****	1			
4. Inclusion status	53	0.05	0.04	-0.17	.04	0.07	1		
5. Attitudes towards change content	43	2.44	0.63	-0.21	.39**	0.17	.34*	1	
6. Resistance to change implementation	46	3.23	0.75	.31*	-.34*	-0.24	-0.01	-.51***	1
7. Change-specific support	53	4.56	0.78	-.17	.04	-.15	.22	.47**	-.03

Note: +p≤.10, *p≤.05, **p≤.01, ***p≤.001, ****p≤.0001. Values are rounded to two decimals.

Table 2: Multilevel Linear Regression predicting Follower Resistance to Change Implementation

	Null (Step 1)	Random Intercept and Fixed Slope Level-1 (Step 2)	Random Intercept and Random Slope Level-1 and 2 (Step 3)	Random Intercept and Random Slope (Step 4)	Cross-level Interaction (Step 5)
	Estimate (γ) (s.e.)	**Estimate (γ) (s.e.)**	**Estimate (γ) (s.e.)**	**Estimate (γ) (s.e.)**	**Estimate (γ) (s.e.)**
Fixed Effects					
Level 1 (Followers)					
Intercept	3.57**** (.06)	3.57**** (.04)	3.58**** (.04)	3.58**** (.04)	3.58**** (.04)
Attitudes towards change content		-.84**** (.05)	-.84**** (.06)	-.84**** (.06)	-.78**** (.06)
Level 2 (Leaders)					
Attitudes towards change content	-	-	.20+ (.10)	.20+ (.10)	.19+ (.10)
Resistance to change implementation	-	-	.19** (.06)	.19** (.07)	.19** (.06)
Change-specific Support			.09 (.06)	.09 (.06)	.09+ (.06)
Cross-level interaction					
Change-specific support * attitudes towards change content	-	-	-	-	-.24** (.09)
Random Effects					
within-school (L1) variance	.60 (.05)	.28 (.03)	.29 (.03)	.29 (.03)	.28 (.03)
Intercept (L2) variance	.09 (.04)	.04 (.02)	.004 (.02)	.00 (.00)	.002 (.01)
Slope (L2) variance				.00 (.00)	
ICC	0.14				
Level 1 (Level 2) sample size	338 (54)	269 (54)	202 (39)	202 (39)	202 (39)
R^2 *Level 1 (Level 2)*		0.54 (0.66)	0.54 (1.00)	0.54 (1.00)	0.56 (0.98)
AIC	828.57	464.41	351.8	347.8	346.29
BIC	840.04	489.57	398.12	387.5	395.92
Deviance	822.57	450.41	323.80	323.80	316.29

Note: +p ≤ .10, *p ≤ .05, **p ≤ .01, ***p ≤ .001, ****p ≤ .0001. Missing data were deleted listwise. All variables are grand-mean centered. Follower attitudes towards change content was group-mean centered in step 5 (to test the cross-level interaction). Control variables are included but not displayed.

Appendix. Labelling in leader survey

The 6-point Likert rating scales for attitudes towards change content and resistance to change implementation have been mislabelled on the leader survey instrument. Descriptions for anchors 2 and 3, as well at 4 and 5, were presented in reverse order than expected. Both poles (1 and 6 respectively) were labelled correctly. After consultation with a statistician, several measures were undertaken to investigate whether or not the data quality had been jeopardized. Since the variables of interest are reliable and valid measures and given the fact that their underlying structure is known, confirmatory factor analyses were used to investigate the model fit. In particular, two versions for both measures were constructed: 1) 6-point Likert scale using data as is and 2) 6-point Likert scale while reversing scores for 2/3 and 4/5 to reflect the mislabelling that occurred. Since these models were not nested, AIC and BIC were compared to evaluate model fit (Kuha, 2004) models with lower values for AIC/BIC are considered better (Wagenmakers & Farrell, 2004). Findings show that the version of the scale with reverse scores was a worse fit for both measures (see table A.1).

Table A.1: Fit Statistics

	AIC	BIC	α
Resistance to Change Implementation			
- as intended	2186.911	2269.198	0.8541
- reversed version	2242.381	2324.676	0.8271
Attitudes towards Change Content			
- as intended	2301.836	2396.941	0.8479
- reversed version	2446.297	2541.402	0.7674

To verify the results, analyses (as presented in table 2) were rerun on a 4-point Likert scale version for both measures where categories 2 and 3 as well as 4 and 5 were collapsed into

one. Recoding variables in this manner makes the mislabelling redundant. Findings were similar and comparable to the previous analyses showing that leader resistance to change implementation is positively associated with follower resistance to change implementation (γ = .22, p=.012) while attitudes towards change content are unrelated to follower resistance to change implementation (γ = .11, p=.49). When testing hypothesis 3, the cross-level interaction is also significant (γ =-.16, p=.028).

Drawing on Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) who argue in favour for more rather than fewer categories, and based on the fact that different Likert scales (e.g. 4-, 5-, 7-point) are substantially robust even in cases of violations of statistical assumptions (Norman, 2010), the original 6-point Likert scale was used. The scale immediately preceding the mislabelled measure (which was also the first presented in the instrument) used a correctly labelled 6-point Likert scale. Despite the risk of residual noise in the data generated by mislabelling the rating scales, the author feels confident in reporting these findings as respondents may have been exposed to forward conditioning (Chang et al., 2004).

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Appendix 2 Variables and Operationalization

Main Variables of Interest

Resistance to Change Implementation (adapted/translated from Change Attitude Scale, Oreg, 2006)

Affective

- *I had a bad feeling about the implementation of inclusion*
- *I was afraid of the implementation of inclusion*
- *I was stressed by the implementation of inclusion*
- *The implementation of inclusion upset me.*
- *I was quite excited about the implementation of inclusion**

Cognitive

- *I believed that the implementation of inclusion would harm organizational processes in the school.*
- *I believed that the implementation of inclusion would benefit the school**
- *I believed I could personally benefit from the implementation of inclusion**
- *I believed that the implementation of inclusion would make my job easier**
- *I think it is positive that we are going through this change**

Behavioral

- *I spoke rather highly of the implementation of inclusion to others**
- *I looked for ways to prevent the implementation of inclusion*
- *I complained about the implementation of inclusion to my colleagues*
- *I presented my objections regarding the implementation of inclusion to the school leadership*
- *I protested against the implementation of inclusion*

Attitudes towards Change Content (translated from Multidimensional Attitudes toward Inclusive Education Scale, Mahat, 2008)

Affective

- *I get frustrated when I have difficulty communicating with students with a disability.**
- *I get upset when students with a disability cannot keep up with the day-to-day curriculum in my classroom.**
- *I get irritated when I am unable to understand students with a disability.**
- *I am uncomfortable including students with a disability in a regular classroom with other students without a disability.**
- *I am disconcerted that students with a disability are included in the regular classroom, regardless of the severity of the disability.**
- *I get frustrated when I have to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of all students.**

Cognitive

- *I believe that students with a disability should be taught in special education schools.**

- *I believe that students with a disability should be segregated because it is too expensive to modify the physical environment of the school.**
- *I believe that students with a disability should be in special education schools so that they do not experience rejection in the regular school.**
- *I believe that an inclusive school is one that permits academic progression of all students regardless of their ability.*
- *I believe that inclusion facilitates socially appropriate behaviour amongst all students.*
- *I believe that any student can learn in the regular curriculum of the school if the curriculum is adapted to meet their individual needs.*

Behavioral

- *I am willing to encourage students with a disability to participate in all social activities in the regular classroom.*
- *I am willing to adapt the curriculum to meet the individual needs of all students regardless of their ability.*
- *I am willing to physically include students with a severe disability in the regular classroom with the necessary support.*
- *I am willing to modify the physical environment to include students with a disability in the regular classroom.*
- *I am willing to adapt my communication techniques to ensure that all students with an emotional and behavioural disorder can be successfully included in the regular classroom.*
- *I am willing to adapt the assessment of individual students in order for inclusive education to take place.*

Leader Change-specific Support (own development)

- *I have talked to my employees about their worries.*
- *I have talked with my employees about their professional development needs.*
- *I have introduced my employees to services that support the development of shared learning and inclusion in schools.*
- *Together with my employees, I have developed approaches to work with children that have behavioral difficulties.*
- *I have facilitated for my employees to be trained to better able to respond to the children's problems.*
- *I have talked with my employees about their strengths and resources.*
- *I have offered my employees to participate in trainings focused on disruptive behavior in children.*

Notes: * indicates item was reverse coded. All items were assessed on a six-point Likert rating scale (1-strongly disagree to 6-strongly agree).