

Article

The Relevance of Visibility in Cultivating Teacher Leaders' Professional Identity

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Abstract: In the realm of education, discussions surrounding the concept of “visibility” typically concentrate on students and marginalized populations, often overlooking highly positioned individuals, such as leading teachers. This research delves into the fundamental importance of visibility in the transformative process of teacher professional development as leaders. It investigates its character among teacher leaders and the experience of being seen and scrutinizes its central role in shaping a cohesive professional identity. Over a two-year period, data were gathered from 42 leading teachers in elementary and high schools using a phenomenological approach. The findings reveal a paradox: despite the visibility of teachers in their communities, expressions of a lack of professional visibility persist in their continuing professional development (CPD). However, visibility is crucial for research participants, serving as a catalyst for shaping their professional identity. This identity formation involves four key processes: recognizing one’s developmental journey, reflecting on professional experiences within a timeframe, fostering introspection, and reconstructing identity based on reflection outcomes. This iterative process signifies continuous evolution and analysis.

Keywords: visibility; teacher identity; damaged identity; teacher leaders (TL); continuing professional development (CPD)

1. Introduction

The present study delves into the role of visibility in shaping the professional identities among a group of leading teachers. The research topic emerges from the overarching concern of cultivating a robust Teacher Professional Identity (TPI) within the education sphere. This subject is of pivotal significance within the realm of education, prompting a persistent urge to explore it across various dimensions and scenarios [1]. Embedded within the broader context of professional development, it prompts questions regarding both the substance and methodology essential to this pivotal journey. Visibility, a cornerstone in the formation of professional identity, highlights the significance of acknowledgment and representation in affirming one’s role within a community. visibility is examined in both inter-level and intra-level contexts. This encompasses how individuals perceive themselves and how they perceive others’ perceptions of them [2].

The need to examine the role of visibility in shaping professional identity, particularly in the realm of education, arises from the insufficiency of studies addressing teachers’ visibility in general. A preliminary review of only the titles of studies dealing with the various aspects of visibility in education in the last two decades indicate that the concept of visibility is examined in relation to two key things: student learning and reference to disadvantaged populations.

The ongoing undervaluation of the teaching profession adds another layer to the discussion, highlighting the importance of considering visibility within the broader societal context where identity formation takes place. Therefore, the scientific problem upon which the research is founded stems from a discrepancy: while teachers hold a central position, they often perceive themselves as having low visibility, which is also reflected in how others perceive them. Day [3] addresses the challenges that teachers face in maintaining a sense



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of identity and agency amidst increasing accountability demands, including feelings of disempowerment, stress, and burnout.

It is noteworthy that a mere 26% of teachers within OECD countries and economies participating in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) [4] perceive that their professional endeavors receive societal appreciation. Furthermore, experienced educators often perceive the teaching profession as undervalued, with approximately 14% of teachers aged 50 years or younger expressing an inclination to depart from the teaching profession.

This phenomenon manifests in the local context of the current study in Israel, where sustained efforts to elevate the status of the teaching profession have proven unsuccessful over the years, resulting in teachers facing public condemnation [5]. One of the contexts for examining the multifaceted and complex nature of teachers' professional identity is a group of leading teachers. Within a local framework, the Teacher leaders (TLs) program is tailored to enhance the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) of educators, guided by peer mentors renowned for their expertise in teaching and education. The program's objective is to broaden the impact of proficient teachers beyond traditional classroom settings [6,7]. The discourse surrounding leading teachers acknowledges their distinct proficiencies in pedagogical and disciplinary domains. It advocates for an ecological approach that comprehensively addresses contextual dynamics and evolving educational requirements [8–10]. Previous research centered on Teacher leaders (TLs) has indicated that teachers frequently encounter challenges in recognizing themselves as leaders, a perception that may not always be evident to their colleagues [11]. In the current context, visibility addresses how TLs perceive themselves and how they perceive others' perceptions of them, including superiors, teaching collaborators, and the broader social and institutional contexts.

Recognizing the importance of teachers developing a clear sense of their professional identity and being visible in their roles, there is a need for more research in this area. Since most existing studies focus on students and minority groups, leaving a gap in understanding how lead educators, who hold a unique position in schools, experience and demonstrate their professional identity. Lead educators are both respected members of school leadership and part of the broader teaching community, which raises questions about how they themselves and the "others", mainly their peers, perceive their professional abilities. Given their unique position and often being part of socioeconomically marginalized group, that is to say teachers, it is important to study how lead educators navigate their professional identities.

Hence, the research goal is to delve into the attributes of visibility within the TLs and to explore how this kind of visibility shapes the development of a professional identity among them. Within this research goal, two research questions are raised:

1. What characterizes the experience of being seen among TLs in the process of their professional continuing development (CPD)?
2. What is the role of participants' visibility in the formation of a coherent sense of TLs' professional identity?

By examining the multifaceted aspects of visibility and teacher leadership in conjunction with theoretical frameworks on professional identity development, researchers and practitioners can attain a more comprehensive grasp of the intricate dynamics within the teaching profession. Such insights hold the potential to bolster endeavors aimed at fostering inclusive and equitable environments conducive to the advancement and empowerment of all educators [1,3].

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study revolves around key elements pertinent to the research subjects. Firstly, it endeavors to delve deeper into the concept of professional identity among teachers, aiming to refine and broaden the introductory discourse provided earlier. This inquiry will specifically concentrate on the crucial role of visibility in molding and fostering professional identity. The prevalent focus in existing research literature on

the teacher's role in creating visibility, rather than recognizing their own need for visibility, underscores the challenging milieu in which teachers operate. This correlation is further accentuated against the backdrop of advocacy for enhancing teacher agency and viewing them as partners in the ongoing professional development of their colleagues within the school community. Hence, the theoretical framework will encompass an examination of teacher agency and leadership, particularly within the context of the research participants. Furthermore, considering the discourse surrounding visibility in the literature and the increasing demand for heightened professionalism among teachers, there arises a necessity to address the issue of acknowledging teachers' professionalism alongside recognizing their emotional and social needs. In this regard, the exploration will delve into the concept of "being seen" and its profound influence on the shaping of teachers' professional identities, with a specific focus on its intersection with Social Emotional Learning (SEL).

2.1. Teacher Professional Identity and the Relevance of Visibility

Beijaard, Koopman and Schellings [12] argue that the notion of teacher professional identity is intricately intertwined with conversations surrounding collective identity, encompassing perceptions of the teacher's role and the conduct expected within professional contexts. Professional identity among teachers comprises both personal identity and group identity. On a personal level, teachers construct their professional identities through a tapestry of experiences, beliefs, values, and interactions within the educational milieu. This intricate process is influenced not only by self-perception but also by external perceptions, highlighting the dialogical nature of identity formation [13]. Furthermore, teachers' identities are sculpted by their membership in the broader professional community, reflecting shared norms, values, and practices. In addition, teachers' collective identity denotes a shared understanding within the professional community regarding their roles and positions within both the school environment and society at large [14].

Davey [15] underscores in his encompassing book the multidisciplinary underpinnings of professional identity while highlighting shared presumptions across personal, social, and cultural dimensions. This underscores the dynamic and multifaceted nature of professional identity, which undergoes continual evolution throughout one's career trajectory. Additionally, interpersonal relationships play a pivotal role in shaping professional identity, intricately linked with emotions and evaluative judgments. Although visibility is acknowledged within these shared assumptions, it does not provide a singular definition in isolation. Instead, it contributes to a nuanced understanding of visibility as a complex social phenomenon intertwined with power dynamics, individual identity, and social interactions. In fact, 'visibility', much like 'identity', can be explored and discussed across different disciplines, with its definition and significance varying depending on the context in which it is studied [16]. The Merriam-Webster dictionary [17] defines "visibility" as the quality or state of being able to see or be seen. It can also refer to the degree of clearness of the atmosphere, as measured by the distance at which prominent objects can be discerned with the naked eye. Additionally, it can denote the degree of prominence or recognition that someone or something has within a particular context or domain. The dictionary definition sharpens certain questions regarding the comprehension of visibility: Who holds the authority to grant visibility? What constitutes the object of visibility? And within what context does visibility operate? These questions become relevant when discussing the dynamics between visibility and invisibility, collective identities, and compromised identities [18].

In the realm of teacher education and professional growth, visibility holds significant sway over the development and validation of teachers' professional identities [19,20]. Recognition and acceptance within the educational sphere foster a sense of belonging and esteem among teachers. This notion of visibility extends beyond mere presence, encompassing recognition of expertise, contributions, and leadership capabilities. By nurturing visibility, teacher education programs and professional development initiatives contribute to the cultivation of authentic and impactful professional identities among educators [21].

However, as previously noted, conversations surrounding visibility in education often prioritize the acknowledgment and representation of diverse student identities, occasionally overlooking the socio-emotional journeys of educators themselves. Hattie and Zierer [22] advocate for examining visible learning, where teachers are called to be facilitators who generate and sustain powerful cultures of learning in classrooms and across schools. The focus on teachers' role to provide visible Teaching and Learning that nurtures mainly disadvantaged populations is paramount. Naylor and Prescott. [23] research, for example, delves into the "invisible children" and addresses the need for support groups for siblings of disabled children. Similarly, Meltzer's [24] focus on young adult siblings, both with and without disabilities, sheds light on often overlooked aspects of visibility. Other studies, such as Brink and Stobbe's [25] investigation into the persistence of gender inequality in academic education, and Powers and Duffy's [26] call to make invisible intersectionality visible in teacher education, contribute significantly to the discourse. In teacher education, Hambacher and Ginn's [27] review from 2002 to 2018 examines the concept of visibility in the context of race-visible teacher education. In other words, the visibility of teachers is frequently overlooked and taken for granted in discussions of empathy and interpersonal dynamics.

While visibility underscores the crucial role of teachers within the education sphere, there is a pressing need within teacher professional development to prioritize a deeper examination of how teachers perceive acknowledgment and construct their professional identities in response. This topic has gained increasing significance among educational researchers aiming to enhance teachers' professional efficacy, agency, and leadership skills.

2.2. Teacher Agency, Teacher Leadership and Visibility

The development of teacher professional identity and the concept of Teacher Agency are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural perspective, particularly within the domains of teacher education, the paradigm of teachers as perpetual learners, and dialogues surrounding effective professional development initiatives [10,28]. At its essence, teacher agency embodies educators' capacity to purposefully act and make informed decisions that mold their teaching methodologies and educational environments.

An essential facet of teacher agency lies in the ability to initiate and guide change, advocate for students' needs, and actively engage in professional growth and advancement, all while steering their professional development constructively and fostering the advancement of their peers [29,30]. Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson [31] underscore that agency is context-dependent and influenced by the cultural, structural, and material resources available to individuals across past, present, and future contexts. They delve into the phenomenon of agency itself and the manner in which it is realized within specific ecological conditions and circumstances, highlighting the intricate nature of teacher agency shaped by professional experiences over time and individual characteristics. Research on educational change and reform (e.g., [32,33]) reinforces the centrality of agency as a fundamental concept in teacher leadership development. Teacher leadership is mostly concerned with forms of empowerment and agency which are also at the core of distributed leadership theory. Models of teacher leadership such as in Schott et al. [34] which describes distributed leadership that addresses more than one person who has expertise at each level or position at school. In such a model, leading teachers demonstrate the ability to initiate and affect interactions in a professional learning community. Frost [9,10] adopted socio-constructivist approaches and investigated the development of teacher leadership in relation to their activity within the space of action, as well as the way by which they express agency, reflexivity, and flexibility. He examines the concept of professional identity and its connection to teacher leadership, analyzing how teachers perceive their roles within the profession, how they exercise leadership within their contexts, and how their professional identities are shaped by their leadership experiences. Lieberman and Miller [35] explore how teacher leadership contributes to ongoing professional development and empowers educators to take ownership of their learning and growth. Teachers exhibiting high lev-

els of agency possess personal and interpersonal skills to communicate effectively with colleagues, employing diverse strategies to influence them directly and indirectly. They acknowledge their role in professional development and actively pursue these goals rather than passively responding to learning opportunities [36]. Teacher visibility complements teacher agency by amplifying the impact of teachers' actions and decisions within the educational landscape. In the realm of education, visible teachers are not only active agents of change but also recognized leaders who inspire and empower their colleagues and students [9]. Through their visible presence and contributions, they shape the culture of their educational institutions and advocate for the needs of their students and communities. The dynamic nature of teacher leadership presents a multifaceted challenge, necessitating teachers to transcend their roles within the teacher–classroom paradigm and assume additional responsibilities to reposition themselves within the peer community [37].

The visibility of the leadership qualities of teachers empowers them but also entails significant responsibilities. Teacher agency, characterized by action rather than mere capacity or competences, plays a pivotal role in influencing teachers' ability to act constructively, guide their professional growth, and contribute to the development of their colleagues [28,29]. This underscores the urgent need within teacher professional development to accord greater attention to the emotional and social dimensions inherent to teachers themselves.

2.3. *Visibility and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)*

The discourse surrounding “visibility” and “recognition” primarily emerges from the social and emotional dimensions of teaching. This study underscores three key aspects drawn from the existing research literature. Firstly, it emphasizes the importance of investigating these dynamics among leading teachers. Secondly, it acknowledges the necessity of addressing the emotional and social facets of teaching, given the challenging nature of the profession and the imperative to prioritize teachers' well-being for optimal performance. Thirdly, it prompts inquiry into effective strategies for achieving these objectives.

Previous research highlights the vital need for emotional support among teacher leaders, notwithstanding their acknowledged expertise and pivotal roles [11]. Scholars such as Long [38] and Sandilos, Neugebauer, DiPerna et al. [39] advocate for empowering school leaders and educators through initiatives focused on adult Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Congdon and Crary [2] propose shifting the narrative from merely defining the role of teachers to actively recognizing their right to visibility and the inherent need for acknowledgment. The daily experiences of teachers are rife with tensions stemming from educational demands, high expectations, parental pressures, and a lack of recognition, which can undermine their professional identity. Teachers often find themselves adopting an apologetic stance to appease various stakeholders, grappling with a persistent focus on “doing” rather than holistic well-being. Consequently, cultivating a supportive environment, establishing norms that encourage self-reflection, respecting observation time, fostering openness to sharing, and embracing both successes and failures without judgment are crucial aspects of teachers' professional growth. Despite recent emphasis on collective reflective learning in teacher development programs, a notable obstacle, as reported in empirical studies, is the absence of emotionally safe spaces [40].

Viac and Fraser [41] define teachers' well-being across four key components: physical and mental health, cognitive wellness, subjective satisfaction, and social harmony. It examines how working conditions at systemic and school levels influence teachers' well-being, impacting stress levels, intentions to remain in the profession, teaching quality, classroom dynamics, and student welfare. Drawing on Seligman et al.'s [42] framework, positive emotion, engagement, and meaning emerge as fundamental elements for life satisfaction, resilience against depression, and facilitating creative learning, particularly in educational settings.

Teachers often tend to dwell on past challenges, neglecting to reflect on their successes. Successful experiences seldom prompt a deliberate search for meaning, often being processed

automatically [43]. Learning from success [44] can mitigate defensiveness and enhance dialogue and motivation. “Appreciative Inquiry” (AI), a technique rooted in positive psychology, offers a structured approach comprising four stages: (1) Discovery—appreciating what works well; (2) Dream—envisioning an ideal future; (3) Design—developing concrete proposals; and (4) Destiny—committing to actionable steps aligned with the envisioned goals. Throughout the continuous professional development of the participants, significant emphasis was placed on the Appreciative Inquiry method, highlighting its characteristics and primary objective of recognizing teachers’ strengths. This acknowledgment is closely intertwined with the concept of visibility, which serves as the central theme of this research, delving into its nuances concerning TLs.

Thus, this study aims to delve into the core of visibility experienced by research participants, particularly focusing on how TLs perceive and characterize being seen within their professional roles. It seeks to examine their sense of professional value and the extent to which they feel acknowledged within their work environment and among peers. Furthermore, the study endeavors to understand the reflective processes of TLs regarding their personal visibility and to analyze its place within the formation of their professional identity.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Design

Research context: TLs’ CPD program in this study, blends pedagogical and psychological elements, focusing on self-identity and interpersonal skills alongside educational prowess. This dual approach aims to cultivate reflective practices, enhance professional efficacy, and foster vitality [45]. TL training occurs through two primary channels: preparing them for pedagogical leadership in teaching roles and equipping them to lead communities. This process integrates aspects of leadership, educational identity, inspiration, motivation, and group mentoring, fostering competencies in reflection and inquiry to empower agency, self-efficacy, and self-realization within TLs and learning communities.

This sub-study constitutes part of a two-year comprehensive research project examining the CPD of teachers who take on leadership roles within learning communities (TLs). A key component of professional development explored in this research is the “TL” training model, which emphasizes collaborative learning communities led by TLs. Within this framework, various aspects of teachers’ professional identity have been investigated, with the current study focusing specifically on the experience of visibility among TLs. Data for this sub-study were extracted from a larger dataset collected as part of the TLs program.

The broad study and this, adopted a qualitative methodology grounded in a phenomenological perspective [46], aimed at engaging with lived experiences with openness, attentiveness, and methodological rigor. By suspending judgment, bracketing biases, and uncovering essential structures, researchers sought deeper insights into the essence of human experiences as perceived and lived by individuals. Providing research participants with a platform to articulate their experiences, the qualitative approach involved employing open tools for data collection. The utilization of diverse tools serves as a transparent means to glean insights into individuals’ inner worlds and the contextual characteristics of their environments [46].

Through this methodological approach, a comprehensive database was generated, revealing themes through various tools and techniques, thereby strengthening the establishment of a robust thematic framework. Furthermore, this method enhances the trustworthiness of the research, a crucial aspect in qualitative inquiry. By embracing this phenomenological perspective, the study aims to illuminate the phenomenon under investigation.

3.2. Participants

3.2.1. Participants Characteristics

In this study, convenience sampling was utilized to select participants. Out of the 48 Teacher leaders (TLs) initially chosen for the TL program by school principals and district supervision, 42 expressed interests in participating in an accompanying study

exploring various dimensions of their teacher professional identity and its cultivation. In fact, the research participants represent a subset of leading teachers identified within the first two years of program implementation across two districts, each contributing unique perspectives and experiences to the study.

Regarding gender distribution, the cohort is predominantly female, with 36 individuals identifying as female and 6 as male. The age range of the participants spans from 27 to 55 years ($M = 41$, $S.D. = 8.8$), reflecting a diverse spectrum of life experiences and perspectives.

In terms of educational background, the majority of participants (28 individuals) have backgrounds in elementary school teaching, while 14 come from high school environments. Additionally, 27 participants hold a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree, while 15 have obtained a Master of Education (M.Ed) degree, showcasing a blend of academic qualifications within the group.

Notably, participants have a wealth of professional experience, with an average tenure of 11 years in their respective roles ($S.T. = 8.4$), indicating a mix of seasoned veterans and those newer to the field, providing a rich array of insights.

Exploring their positions within intermediate leadership, 24 participants currently hold such roles, with tenures ranging from 2 to 9 years, highlighting a depth of managerial experience among a significant subset of the cohort. Conversely, 18 participants do not currently occupy intermediate leadership positions, suggesting a diverse mix of perspectives, including those at various stages of their careers.

In terms of the limitations of convenience sampling, while qualitative research aims for rich, detailed insights rather than broad generalizations, it is crucial to acknowledge how the characteristics of the sample and the selection method may affect the generalizability of findings beyond the study's specific context. Additionally, the subjective nature of phenomenological research introduces the potential for researcher bias and interpretation, particularly when the researcher is an outsider to the community under study. I recognize that my perspective may differ from those of the participants. Therefore, steps were taken to mitigate bias through reflexivity and colleagues' review. Moreover, the constraints of this study, as a sub-study, affected the depth of engagement with participants and the scope of data collection. While efforts were made to ensure rigor and depth in the analysis, it is important to acknowledge that limitations in data collection may have restricted the richness of participant voices presented in this study. Acknowledging sampling limitations encouraged the consideration of triangulation methods to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Triangulation involved utilizing multiple data sources, methods, or perspectives to corroborate findings, thereby strengthening the robustness of the research findings.

3.2.2. Ethic Perspective

The research participants demonstrated an interest in engaging with an accompanying study investigating various facets of the program's dynamics. Aware of the study's focus on exploring a relatively novel area within the research domain, namely the emergence of leading teachers who cultivate their professional identities as leaders within learning communities at their respective schools, they willingly volunteered to contribute their perspectives and experiences to this research. All participants provided informed consent, and their anonymity was rigorously maintained.

All research participants embraced an ethical stance grounded in the concept of alliance, recognizing their integral role in the research process. They viewed themselves as active contributors, driven by an ethos that prioritizes mutual benefit. Rather than solely focusing on the interests of the researcher and the research itself, they acknowledged the reciprocal advantages inherent in such collaborative endeavors. This perspective underscores their commitment to a shared journey where both researchers and participants stand to gain valuable insights and advancements.

The study adhered to the principles of the Helsinki Declaration, and its protocol received approval from the Ethics Committee of the sampled college (ethics approval code 2023053101).

3.3. Data Collection

To deeply explore the phenomenon of visibility among teacher leaders and its role in shaping a cohesive professional identity, a combination of open research tools was employed. This included in-depth open interviews and the examination of reflective documents from Teacher leaders (TLs). The open interviews [47], which lasted between 50 and 90 min, posed the overarching question: ‘What does it mean for you to be a TL?’ These interviews provided a platform for participants to express their perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and teaching practices, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of identity formation.

In addition to interviews, TLs’ reflective documents, such as portfolios containing insights into procedural work during professional development, offered valuable perspectives on the challenges, solutions, and successes encountered by teacher leaders. An open questionnaire, administered during the research and featuring three open-ended questions, was designed to target emerging categories of information. These questions delved into aspects such as the development of professional identity, experiences in leadership roles, and reflections on the learning process within the community.

Furthermore, the researcher practiced *epoché*, suspending personal biases and preconceptions, to approach the study with a fresh perspective. This methodological tool aimed to accurately capture the richness and complexity of participants’ experiences, uncovering deeper insights into the lived reality of visibility among teacher leaders as perceived by the participants.

3.4. Data Analyses

The research employs a thematic analysis methodology, with a focus on elucidating participants’ experiences of visibility. These experiences are primarily understood through an inductive process. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke [48] is highlighted for its versatility, adaptability, and inherent flexibility compared to other qualitative techniques. Consequently, it facilitates the development of nuanced and comprehensive interpretations of datasets. Furthermore, this approach is consistent with Majumdar’s assertion [49] that thematic analysis, due to its simplicity yet richness in data analysis, can be applied across various research paradigms, such as the constructionist paradigm, which views meaning and experiences as social phenomena rather than purely individual perspectives. This thematic analysis methodology aligns well with the research’s focus on exploring the experiences of both seeing and being seen, encapsulating the essence of visibility. Therefore, the data underwent thematic analysis following Nowell et al.’s [50] six phases of inductive thematic analysis to ensure trustworthiness. The analysis began with researchers familiarizing themselves with the entire dataset, followed by coding all data in the subsequent phase. Once potential themes were identified, they were reviewed and refined to accurately reflect the gathered data from all research tools. Additionally, consultation with colleagues, who are experts in the field, took place to validate and enhance the credibility of the identified themes. This phase involved examining the coherence and relevance of each theme in relation to the research questions. The identified themes were then discussed alongside the relevant research literature, incorporating etic categories, to make sense of the results by aligning them with the existing literature in the field. The final phase involved synthesizing the findings and presenting them in a coherent and meaningful manner, including organizing the themes into a structured narrative and providing supporting evidence from the data. These six phases of thematic analysis helped uncover meaningful insights and generate rich, nuanced interpretations regarding the experience of being seen among research participants and how it cultivated their professional identity as a TL.

4. Results

In this chapter, the findings of the thematic analysis are presented, highlighting the prominent themes derived from the data. The analysis yielded five main themes, each offering insights into various facets of the participants’ experiences and perceptions concerning the formation of their professional identity, with visibility serving as a central lever within the educational context and in their continuing professional development (CPD). The outcomes of the thematic analysis, as delineated in Tables 1–3, mark a pivotal juncture in the comprehensive examination of inductively derived thematic content. Table 1 encapsulates participant perspectives, highlighting central themes, addressing pertinent queries that surfaced during the analytical process, and facilitating responses to the primary research question. Similarly, Table 2 performs this function in the context of the secondary research question. While all themes are pertinent to both inquiries, the themes: ‘Authenticity and Relevance’, ‘Source of Authority’ and ‘Path to Visibility’ take precedence in addressing the initial question, which delves into examining characteristics. Conversely, the themes ‘Visibility Impediments’ and ‘Deconstruction and Reconstruction’ are particularly highlighted in relation to the second research question, which aims to comprehend how visibility fosters TLs’ cohesive identity. Table 3 meticulously catalogues all pertinent themes, including sub-themes, alongside their respective descriptions.

Table 1. Participants’ voices, main themes, and questions raised in the thematic analysis. (RQ1).

Participants’ Voices	Main Themes	Questions Raised in the Thematic Analysis.
<p>L: “There was a deliberate and unhurried process where we were provided with space. They genuinely wanted to listen to us, not just as a formality before rushing us towards our objectives. We knew we had time for introspection, at least in the initial year, to pause, reflect, and grow. There was a comforting and liberating aspect to it—something that truly allowed for genuine conversation and personal development. In many professional development courses, conversations among participants are encouraged. It’s a stimulating and dynamic workshop environment, but I often leave feeling like we haven’t fully concluded the process. . . At least, I haven’t organized my thoughts sufficiently or delved deeply enough into the significance of what my colleagues were expressing.”</p> <p>N: “From the very first session, I noticed a distinct difference in teacher in-service training here compared to previous experiences. We feel respected. Everything is meticulously planned with attention to detail, yet there’s ample room for us to engage.”</p> <p>K: “Today’s session felt too psychological for my liking. I prefer more practical and expedient tools. . .”</p>	Authenticity and Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does CPD cater to individual needs while fulfilling professional obligations?• How does the time allocated for CPD accommodate personal needs and professional expectations?• What are the primary intentions guiding participation in CPD?
<p>D: “Although I was selected as a teacher-leader, this prolonged focus on my unique abilities is incredibly empowering. . .”</p> <p>E: “The TLs’ enthusiasm for Appreciative Inquiry illustrates the stark reality where teachers are invisible and often lack the space to fully express their sense of worth. . .”</p> <p>S: “Engaging in this process brought me back to my roots, to the initial spark that led me here. Amidst the myriad tasks and administrative duties, it’s easy to lose sight of why we chose this profession. This work rekindled my passion for the teacher-student relationship, which is the core reason for my dedication to teaching. I refuse to squander time on trivialities. At 55, I seek significance.”</p>	Recognition: Paths to Visibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does appreciative inquiry contribute to teachers’ visibility?• How do positive interpersonal relationships influence professional visibility?• How are mentors’ positive mindset approaches contributing to teacher professional identity?

Table 1. Cont.

Participants' Voices	Main Themes	Questions Raised in the Thematic Analysis.
<p>L: "As I questioned my leadership role in this new context, others shared concerns about how teachers at the school would receive the process. Would some view it as an additional burden? Others worried that resentment might arise among teachers who were not chosen to lead this initiative. Maintaining an equalitarian process was crucial to me, steering clear of a condescending stance and ensuring a collaborative approach throughout."</p> <p>I: "When I received my nomination as a TL, I was filled with excitement. I vividly recall the evening my husband picked me up from work after a lengthy team meeting that had stretched into the evening. Earlier, he had also picked up our son, who was in the 11th grade, from football practice. As we drove home together, my husband wore a proud smile, his silent support speaking volumes. In the car behind us, our son asked, "Does this mean you'll earn more now?" I tried to explain that the nomination wasn't directly tied to salary, but he interrupted me, perhaps expecting me to launch into a discussion about missions and values once again. "Then, what's the point? . . . teachers. . ." he interjected".</p> <p>B: "Engaging in our development meetings as TLs clarified my role as a teacher and prompted self-reflection. Despite being recognized as an expert in pedagogical practices, I am also creative, developing unique curricula, attuned to my students' needs. This complexity is imparted to the teachers in my learning community. I wanted them to perceive themselves as multifaceted professionals. . . the responsibility for the process rests with me; I guide and propel, without which progress would stall."</p>	Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are the sources of authority that grant visibility? • How do teachers perceive their own professionalism? • How do interactions with 'others' influence professional visibility?

Table 2. Participants' voices, main themes, and questions raised in the thematic analysis. (RQ2).

Participants' Voices	Main Themes	Questions Raised in the Thematic Analysis.
<p>N: "During a workshop discussion with Lia, a fellow teacher-leader, she drew my attention to a noteworthy departure from our typical in-service training conversations. Instead of delving into discussions on necessary changes, 21st-century skills, outdated teaching methods, or the integration of technological innovations, Lia's comment compelled me to contemplate the underlying message inherent in educational discourse. It perpetuates the notion that teachers fall short, lack professionalism, and adhere to antiquated methods."</p> <p>"B": "I acknowledge that my selection as a teacher-leader is rooted in my ability to implement problem-based learning in 7th-grade classrooms, but the crux of my success as a teacher lies in capturing the informal moments—the breaks, the trips, the special events. These are the realms where values and a certain worldview are imparted. Amidst the focus on teaching methods, the essence of what we impart to students is far more significant. I believe this is where our true leadership as educators lies."</p>	Visibility Impediments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do oversimplified binaries hinder the recognition of professional identity complexity? • How does the acknowledgment of multifaceted aspects contribute to holistic professional identity? • How do challenges with peers affect professional visibility?

Table 2. Cont.

Participants’ Voices	Main Themes	Questions Raised in the Thematic Analysis.
<p>S: “Throughout the year, our collective introspection, analysis of our identity as both teachers and leaders, has engendered a heightened connection to our professional wellsprings of strength. While the leadership component requires further development, there exists a heightened awareness and the development of self-efficacy.”</p> <p>B: “Engaging in our development meetings as TLs clarified my role as a teacher and prompted self-reflection. Despite being recognized as an expert in pedagogical practices, I am also creative, developing unique curricula, attuned to my students’ needs. This complexity is imparted to the teachers in my learning community. I wanted them to perceive themselves as multifaceted professionals. . . the responsibility for the process rests with me; I guide and propel, without which progress would stall.”</p> <p>T: “I analyze my qualities with precision, moving beyond generalized statements. Confidently, I assert this due to the process of identifying my strengths, self-belief, acknowledgment of my successes, and leadership geared towards effecting meaningful change within my organization. This has instilled a robust sense of confidence and belief in my success throughout this journey as a TL.”</p>	Identity Deconstruction and Reconstruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do moments of crisis contribute to the evolution of professional identity?• What is the meaning of recognition and acceptance of leadership roles for professional identity reconstruction?• How do personal and external validations contribute to professional identity reconstruction?

The following table provides a detailed breakdown of each main theme, including sub-themes, derived from the thematic analysis:

Table 3. Themes, sub-themes, and descriptions.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Description
Authenticity and Relevance	Teacher Role vs. Identity	Participants question whether continuing professional development (CPD) aligns with their authentic needs and mission as educators or if it merely conforms to predefined roles and expectations. They ponder the balance between fulfilling their professional obligations and addressing their personal well-being.
	Time	Participants express concerns regarding the time allocated to CPD and its impact on addressing their personal needs versus meeting external expectations.
	Intentions	Teachers reflect on the underlying intentions driving their participation in CPD, questioning whether the process prioritizes their growth as educators or serves external agendas.
Source of Authority	Self	Participants consider their internal perceptions of their professional visibility and authority, reflecting on how they perceive themselves within the educational community.
	Peers	Teachers evaluate the influence of their colleagues on their visibility within the profession, considering how they are perceived by their peers and the impact on their professional identity as TLs.
	CPD facilitators	Participants reflect on the recognition and acknowledgment they receive from their superiors, exploring how this affects their visibility and authority within the educational context.

Table 3. *Cont.*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Description
Paths to Visibility	Appreciative Inquiry	Participants recognize the value of methods like appreciative inquiry in shaping their understanding of their roles as educators and enhancing their visibility within the profession.
	Positive vs. Negative Observation	Participants differentiate between positive and negative observations within CPD, considering how positive one impacts their visibility and professional growth.
	Complexity vs. Partiality	Participants reflect on the depth and scope of their teacher professional identity, considering whether it encompasses the complexity of their roles or provides only partial insights.
	Instrumental vs. Identity-focused Observation	Participants evaluate whether observations within CPD focus solely on outcomes (instrumental) or also consider their professional identity and values.
Visibility Impediments	Complexity vs. Binary	Participants identify the challenge of navigating complex aspects of their professional identity amidst oversimplified binary categorizations, hindering holistic self-construction.
	Holism vs. Partiality	Teachers express frustration with the lack of recognition for the multifaceted aspects of their professional identity, which may include pedagogy, agency, and values, inhibiting comprehensive self-construction.
	TL	Participants recognize obstacles in assuming leadership roles within the peer's context, which may limit their visibility and authority within the educational community.
Deconstruction and Reconstruction	Crisis and Doubt	Teachers acknowledge moments of crisis and self-doubt in the process of deconstructing their professional identity, leading to reflection and eventual reconstruction.
	Recognition and Acceptance	Participants embrace the label of “teacher leader” after acknowledging their contributions and accepting leadership roles within the educational community, facilitating the reconstruction of their professional identity.
	Personal and External Validation	Teachers reconstruct their identity through both personal reflection and external validation, leading to an expanded understanding of their professional roles and contributions.

In summary, the thematic findings provided above offer valuable insights into the lived experiences of individuals as they navigate their visibility within the realm of CPD, approached from a phenomenological perspective. The interwoven nature of the five main themes addresses the two research questions, underscores the multifaceted aspect of visibility and highlights the intricate interplay of individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors that contribute to shaping their professional identity.

5. Discussion

This chapter aims to delve into the significance of the findings obtained from the exploration of the two research questions concerning the experiences of Teacher Leaders (TLs) within the context of their professional continuing development (CPD). Firstly, it enquires into the characteristics that define the experience of being seen among TLs as they engage in CPD initiatives. This investigation sheds light on the nuances of visibility and its implications for TLs' professional growth. Secondly, it examines the role of participants' visibility in shaping a cohesive sense of professional identity among TLs.

5.1. Exploring Visibility Attributes among TLs

The exploration of visibility attributes among TLs aimed to understand the intricacies of the visibility experience among prominent educators. The analysis uncovered two primary characteristics: firstly, the pivotal and essential role of visibility, and secondly, the multifaceted nature of this requirement. This study diverges from existing research such as

Hattie and Zierer [22], which primarily discusses teacher visibility in the context of ‘seeing the students’, by emphasizing the need for teachers to be visible in various dimensions. In alignment with global findings by the OECD [4] and local context observations [5], the study suggests that teaching roles are undervalued. In the present study, research participants emphasized the importance of their visibility in professional development by directly and profoundly addressing their authentic needs. They achieved this through a dual approach of affirmation, articulating what should be pursued in professional development, and negation, delineating what should be avoided. This comprehensive method not only clarified appropriate actions but also provided insight into how to effectively engage in them. This approach resonates with scholars like Frost [9,10], who emphasize the critical importance of creating environments that nurture authentic dialogue and reflection. These environments prioritize individual needs and professional missions, thereby fostering significant growth and development. Additionally, this underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing broader societal attitudes and challenges confronting the teaching profession, including issues related to recognition, support, and compensation [1,3]. The personal articulation of authentic needs among research participants further underscores the notion that experiencing visibility within a professional identity context entail integrating both personal and professional dimensions [2,12].

Furthermore, the combination of emotional and social characteristics highlighted in this research enriches the existing literature by emphasizing their interconnectedness and significant influence on each other. Scholars such as Long [38], Gemmink et al. [40], and Sandilos et al. [39] underscore the importance of considering emotional and social aspects due to the demanding teaching conditions and considerable pressure experienced by educators. Concepts concerning teacher well-being [41,43] underscore the fundamental human need for recognition and support, which is also influenced by societal narratives.

The concept of visibility extends beyond fulfilling basic needs; it also encompasses the essential requirement for multifaceted recognition among TLs. Recognition involves professional evaluation both from the TLs’ own perspective and in terms of how others acknowledge their professional qualities. The TLs’ enthusiasm for Appreciative Inquiry reflects on one hand, a typical expectation ingrained in conventional discourse and habitual behaviors, where instrumental aspects and the teacher’s role are prioritized [22]. On the other hand, it sheds light on the harsh reality where teachers often remain invisible and lack the opportunity to fully express their sense of worth. TLs highlight the complexities inherent in navigating questions of self-worth and identity within the context of professional development. This finding speaks to the nuanced interplay between external validation and internal perceptions of authority, suggesting that visibility stems from a deep understanding of one’s own capabilities and contributions. This goes beyond mere celebration of professional achievements; it involves the creation of a meaningful space for self-expression. This sentiment aligns with the findings of Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop [12,14], which illustrate how teachers’ identities are shaped by their membership in the broader professional community, reflecting shared norms, values, and practices. Furthermore, teachers’ collective identity signifies a mutual understanding within the professional community regarding their roles and positions within both the school environment and society as a whole.

In summary, visibility emerges as a foundational requirement shaping professional identity among TLs, serving both as a professional necessity and an emotional need. The nuanced panorama of visibility experiences unveils a paradoxical interplay between profound visibility and prolonged experiences of invisibility among TLs, particularly during CPD. These findings prompt reflection on the influence of various stakeholders within the visibility landscape and underscore the multifaceted nature of teachers’ visibility experiences within their professional identity. Through positive interpersonal relationships, TLs can gain support, encouragement, feedback, and validation for their professional roles and contributions, ultimately contributing to a sense of belonging and efficacy within the profession. The overall picture echoes Congdon and Crary [2] who underscored visibility as

a foundational requirement, playing a pivotal role in shaping professional identity. Hence, visibility acts as a lever stimulating the process of forming a conscious professional identity, which is in the center of the second research question: what is the role of visibility in the formation of a coherent sense of TLs' professional identity?

5.2. Visibility and TLs' Professional Identity Formation

Despite their roles as TLs, participants demonstrate limited reflection on the complexity of visibility and its relevance in the process of cultivating their professional identity. The findings reveal a developmental journey in terms of their self-awareness. The conditions established for them within the CPD process enable them to pause, to delve into their identities, and to comprehend the challenges involved in navigating a complex and multifaceted identity. They are provided with the opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct their identities, while also embracing the evolving role of being leading teachers.

The transformative process identified in previous research [11] on Teacher Leaders (TLs) receives further validation here. This process instigates a heightened sense of mindfulness among TLs, facilitated by purposeful pauses for reflective contemplation and experiential exploration, as evidenced by success narratives [38], and their potential to cultivate a positive professional identity, as illustrated by Seligman et al. [42]. It is evident that mere partial awareness is insufficient for the development of a coherent professional identity; it requires deliberate reflection, mentorship, and professional learning experiences that promote self-awareness and critical inquiry, all while navigating the complexities of visibility within their professional spheres.

TLs recognize the significance of embracing additional facets of their identity, transcending a limited concept focused solely on pedagogical prowess. This broader understanding of identity is deeply intertwined with visibility, as TLs navigate their roles as agents of norms and values within the profession. The issue of visibility intertwines with the facets of oppression outlined by Young [51], resonating with interpretations presented by Nelson [18] and holding significant relevance for the present study, which centers on the visibility challenges faced by TLs. The reflective processes, both general and specific to examining 'visibility impediments', entail a conscious formulation of teacher-learners' (TLs) identity narrative, serving as a crucial catalyst for change. TLs progress from a narrow focus on pedagogical strengths towards a more holistic comprehension of their multifaceted identity, deeply intertwined with the essence of teaching. Reflecting on visibility impediments helps TLs grasp how their professional identity might, as Nelson [18] aptly noted, become 'damaged', incoherent, or partial in various respects. Visibility significantly influences the formation of a cohesive professional identity among TLs in their CPD. As TLs become more visible at both inter- and intra-professional levels, they gain opportunities to articulate and refine their professional identities. The impetus for instigating or catalyzing the change process lies in fostering awareness of visibility factors. Reflexivity serves as the driving force behind expanding the dimensions of visibility, empowering TLs to redefine and amplify their professional identity.

Crafting an intentional identity narrative empowers educators to highlight their strengths, redirecting attention away from weaknesses towards areas ripe for growth. Utilizing Appreciative Inquiry, which encompasses past, present, and future perspectives, facilitates this introspective journey. Through this approach, individuals embark on a transformative path, simultaneously deepening their sense of "teacher" identity while nurturing their emergence as leaders. This process of solidifying their identity as "teachers" concurrently shapes their future interactions with colleagues. Remarkably, the experience of visibility gained at the initiation and throughout the process emerges as a central aspect in defining their identity as leaders. The process of identity deconstruction and reconstruction seems to be inherent to TLs' professional development journey [11]. CPD initiatives provide opportunities for them to critically reflect on their practice, challenge existing assumptions, and reconceptualize their professional identities. Through this process, TLs deepen their understanding of themselves as professionals and expand their capacity to

effect meaningful change within their educational communities. As they reconstruct their professional identities, they become more visible within their professional circles, garnering recognition for their expertise and leadership. This heightened visibility reinforces their sense of agency and empowers them to enact positive change within their schools and districts.

In summary, the experience of visibility catalyzes four fundamental processes in the formation of professional identity. Firstly, it entails the convergence of three temporal dimensions, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the essence and developmental trajectory of professional identity over time, as evidenced in research participants' discussions on Appreciative Inquiry. Secondly, it initiates a reflective process wherein professional experiences are meticulously examined within a temporal framework, fostering deeper introspection. The third process revolves around comprehending the outcomes of this reflection on professional identity, elucidating its contents and scopes. Lastly, the fourth process entails identity reconstruction following a thorough examination and potential dissolution in preceding phases. This iterative cycle represents a dynamic process of identity formation characterized by continual reflection, analysis, and evolution. Moreover, it empowers TLs agency to advocate for a positive shift in the discourse surrounding teaching and leadership. The attained visibility is channeled towards crafting a narrative that acknowledges not only their past achievements and current strengths but also envisions a positive and dynamic future for themselves and their profession, embracing all facets of identity.

6. Conclusions

After carefully analyzing the findings and their implications for the research population of Teacher Leaders (TLs) and the central focus of the case—the visibility experience of leading teachers—several significant conclusions emerge.

Firstly, it is evident that there exists a notable lack of emphasis on providing opportunities for teachers to be seen within educational contexts. The prevailing expectation often leans towards teachers being the ones who see rather than being seen. This observation underscores a systemic imbalance in recognition and acknowledgment within educational frameworks.

Building upon this initial finding, the second conclusion highlights the misconception that visibility is a given, even among influential groups such as teacher leaders. Contrary to assumptions, visibility cannot be assumed or guaranteed solely based on one's role or position within the educational hierarchy. Rather, it necessitates deliberate efforts to create spaces and platforms for visibility to manifest.

Moreover, the third conclusion emphasizes the critical need for heightened attention to the visibility of "ordinary" teachers. While TLs occupy leadership roles, it is essential to recognize and address the visibility challenges faced by all educators, regardless of their formal titles or positions. By sharpening our understanding of how visibility influences their Continuing Professional Development (CPD), we can better support the holistic growth and development of educators at all levels. Furthermore, there is a need to explore the intersectionality of TL identities, acknowledging the complex interplay between various dimensions such as gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and educational experiences. Understanding how these intersecting identities intersect and influence TLs' professional identity development is crucial for promoting inclusive and equitable CPD practices.

Lastly, the fourth conclusion underscores the transformative journey that TLs undergo in their quest to act as effective leaders. Becoming a leader is not a linear process but rather a nuanced and prolonged journey characterized by intentional reflection, mentorship, and experiential learning. TLs require conducive conditions that enable them to deepen their understanding of themselves as professionals and expand their capacity to effect meaningful change within their educational communities. Only through such a comprehensive

developmental process can TLs truly embody their roles as leaders and catalysts for positive change in education.

By addressing these research conclusions and more, scholars may contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of visibility, professional identity formation, and teacher leadership, ultimately informing the development of more effective policies and practices to support educators' growth and development.

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