

Redefining Human Centric Skills through ‘Quality Talk’

Chapter Eight: ‘Quality Talk’: Human-Centred Education in a Complex Rural School Space

Marisa Leask

Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Introduction

Globally, education systems are under growing pressure to evolve beyond mechanistic models of teaching and learning toward more holistic, inclusive and contextually responsive paradigms (UNESCO 2021). In South Africa, where historical injustices, socio-economic inequality and systemic under-resourcing remain deeply embedded in the education landscape, this imperative is especially urgent. Deep-seated socio-economic inequality, the legacy of apartheid-era educational planning, and chronic under-resourcing continue to shape rural schooling landscapes. In these contexts, teachers and students face multiple intersecting barriers, overcrowded classrooms, infrastructure deficits and linguistic diversity, which make equitable and effective teaching exceptionally complex (Maile 2008; Spaul 2013).

Within this reality, Human-Centred Education (HCE) offers not just a philosophical vision, but a practical reorientation of pedagogy. HCE places students at the centre of the educational experience, valuing their voices, identities and lived experiences as essential resources for learning. It prioritises agency, relational trust, inclusion and the co-construction of knowledge, principles important in rural classrooms where many students experience social marginalisation, language barriers and constrained educational opportunity (Biesta, 2010; Le Grange, 2019). In contrast

to traditional models that emphasise compliance and content coverage, HCE encourages dialogic, participatory and emotionally safe learning environments. Yet, operationalising HCE in rural schools demands pedagogical models that are both theoretically grounded and adaptable to local realities. This chapter argues that Quality Talk (QT) is one such model. Developed as a structured framework for classroom dialogue, QT helps students develop critical thinking, deep comprehension and collaborative reasoning through purposeful discussion (Kim and Wilkinson 2019; Murphy et al. 2009). Rooted in sociocultural learning theory and dialogic pedagogy, QT views students as active contributors to knowledge construction. It encourages open-ended questioning, respectful disagreement and student-led meaning-making—core practices that align closely with HCE’s emphasis on student agency and inclusion (Alexander 2020; Wilkinson et al. 2019).

In the South African context, QT has been locally adapted as *Inkhulumo*, a school-based intervention tailored to the linguistic, socio-economic, and cultural complexities of rural classrooms (Leask 2019). *Inkhulumo* integrates QT’s core principles with culturally relevant content, mother tongue discussion, and flexible facilitation practices. This has allowed it to function not only as a cognitive tool for comprehension, but also as a developmental framework that fosters belonging, confidence and peer connection among marginalised students (Ngwaru 2011; Zhou and Hassan 2024).

The chapter builds a case for QT as both an instructional model and a vehicle for advancing HCE in complex educational settings. It highlights how QT supports three interconnected shifts essential to human-centred teaching: the development of critical-analytic thinking; the emergence of collaborative, inclusive discourse and the creation of equitable, relational learning environments. These dimensions are especially powerful in rural schools, where dominant pedagogies often fail to support student engagement or respect the diverse realities students bring into the classroom. To develop this argument, the chapter is structured into five interlinked sections: (1) Theoretical Foundations of QT introduces the conceptual basis of QT, including its roots in sociocultural theory and dialogic pedagogy, and links these to the principles of HCE. (2) Classroom Discourse and Holistic

Development examine how QT supports cognitive, social and emotional development, with a focus on voice, confidence and agency. (3) Quality Talk in Rural Schools: Complexity and Adaptation explore how QT was locally adapted as *Inkhulumo* to suit multilingual, resource-constrained classrooms, while preserving human-centred principles. (4) Cultural Responsiveness and Human-Centred Instructional Design discuss how QT accommodates linguistic and cultural diversity through inclusive dialogue and contextual design. (5) Conclusion and Implications for Practice synthesise key insights and offer practical recommendations for educators, school leaders and policy actors committed to advancing HCE. Through this structure, the chapter contributes both conceptually and practically to the growing field of human-centred education, with a particular focus on its application in the Global South. It positions QT not as a rigid method, but as a flexible, relational pedagogy capable of transforming classrooms shaped by complexity, scarcity and historical injustice.

Theoretical foundations of QT

This section outlines the theoretical foundation for applying HCE in rural schools, where teaching and learning are shaped by a range of social, cultural and economic complexities. To address these realities, this chapter draws on the QT framework, an adaptable model that turns classrooms into spaces of *structured* dialogue, critical thinking and student voice.

HCE in complexity

HCE is a pedagogical orientation that places students at the centre of the educational experience, recognising them as capable agents whose identities, voices and experiences matter. It prioritises relational trust, student autonomy, emotional well-being and the co-construction of knowledge through meaningful participation (Biesta 2010; Le Grange 2019). Three foundational principles of HCE, student autonomy, inclusivity and co-construction are particularly relevant in rural education, where rigid, top-down instruction often dominates. Student autonomy means giving students some control over how they explore content, for example,

by allowing them to choose discussion topics or link lessons to personal experiences. Inclusivity ensures that all students, regardless of background or ability, can meaningfully participate. Co-construction encourages knowledge to emerge through interaction, negotiation and reflection.

HCE must also be understood through the lens of complexity theory, which emphasises the dynamic, interconnected and often unpredictable nature of educational environments. In this view, schools are not static institutions but complex adaptive systems, where learning and change emerge through the interaction of diverse elements, students, teachers, resources, policies and community conditions, rather than from top-down control ((Davis and Sumara 2010; Fidan and Balcı 2017). In rural schools, where socio-economic instability, language diversity and structural under-resourcing intersect, such complexity is heightened. Effective pedagogy in these settings must, therefore, be adaptive, relational and contextually grounded, responding to shifting conditions with flexibility and care (Mason 2008).

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QT framework

QT, a structured, teacher-facilitated and student-driven discussion model, grounded in a synthesis of sociocultural learning theory, complexity theory and dialogic pedagogy, making it a robust model for advancing HCE in under-resourced, high-need school environments. At its core, QT builds on

Vygotsky's idea that students learn best through guided support from others (Vygotsky 1978) social constructivist theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This theory emphasises that students develop higher order thinking through guided interaction with more knowledgeable others. QT extends this through structured dialogue and scaffolded talk moves, creating conditions where students actively co-construct meaning with peers and teachers. QT sees students not just as listeners, but as thoughtful contributors who can ask questions, challenge ideas and help shape the lesson, aligning directly with HCE's emphasis on student agency, voice and autonomy (Biesta 2010; Le Grange 2019).

QT also draws on the dialogic teaching framework (Alexander 2018), which defines effective classroom dialogue as collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful. Dialogic interaction in QT invites students to ask authentic questions, justify their thinking and engage critically with diverse perspectives. This dialogic emphasis aligns closely with inclusivity and co-construction, two core pillars of HCE. The framework provides a structured approach to promote authentic discussions in classrooms, aiming to replace monologic, teacher-dominated talk with dialogue that encourages students to reason, question, justify and elaborate (Murphy et al. 2009). It transforms classroom talk into a tool for critical thinking, agency and relational learning. Students are taught to construct and critique arguments, integrating textual evidence with logical reasoning. This is achieved through four core components:

- **Authentic Questioning vs. Test Questions:** Rather than focusing on recall or single-answer responses, QT promotes open-ended, interpretive questions that invite multiple perspectives and deeper reasoning.
- **Teacher Scaffolding and Responsive Dialogue:** Teachers model effective discourse strategies, use follow-up prompts and adjust support based on student responses. Teachers shift from knowledge transmitters to facilitators of inquiry, building student confidence in articulating and defending their ideas.
- **Interpretive Authority and Student-Led Discussions:** Students are encouraged to take ownership of meaning-making, pose their

own questions and challenge peer reasoning, shifting the authority from teacher to student.

- Collaborative Reasoning: Students are taught to engage with one another's ideas using reasoning moves such as justifying, elaborating, clarifying and respectfully disagreeing.

In these ways, QT explicitly reinforces human-centred principles. It creates space for student voice, encourages active participation and treats students as co-constructors of knowledge. In rural classrooms, where students are sometimes expected to be silent and obedient, QT helps break that pattern. It encourages students to speak, think aloud and engage actively with one another. While the theoretical foundation of QT is compelling, its true power lies in how these principles are enacted in real classrooms. The following section demonstrates how QT was implemented in rural South African schools, bringing the framework to life. Having established the theoretical foundations of QT and its alignment with HCE, the next section illustrates how these principles were brought to life through the implementation of QT in rural South African classrooms.

Classroom discourse and holistic development

Building on the theoretical foundations of HCE and dialogic pedagogy, this section illustrates how structured classroom conversations, particularly those modelled through the QT framework, foster students' cognitive, social and emotional development. The QT model not only deepens content understanding, it also transforms classroom culture by supporting inclusive, reflective and agentic participation.

Cognitive development through discourse

When students engage in structured, student-led discussions such as those promoted by the QT framework, they develop a deeper understanding of texts, enhance their critical reasoning skills and become more cognitively flexible. Unlike traditional approaches that emphasise passive knowledge absorption, QT fosters a dialogic environment where students articulate their ideas, justify their reasoning and collaboratively explore complex

concepts. Research has shown that students participating in QT demonstrate significant improvements in high-level reading comprehension and written argumentation, even compared to peers receiving other forms of enriched literacy instruction (Murphy et al. 2022; Li et al. 2016). Central to this development is the concept of “interthinking”, the idea that collaborative thinking occurs through talk (Littleton and Mercer 2013). Within QT discussions, students are taught to listen attentively, build on each other’s ideas and synthesise new understandings through interaction. This process is especially powerful when authentic questions are used. Unlike test-based questions that elicit factual recall, authentic questions provoke diverse viewpoints and encourage students to engage in higher-order thinking, a feature consistently linked with gains in comprehension and reasoning performance (Soter et al. 2008; Wilkinson et al. 2017).

Social growth and collaborative learning

The QT framework fosters collaborative learning by engaging students in small-group discussions where they actively listen, question and support each other. This structure enables students to co-construct knowledge, negotiate meaning and develop social competencies such as respectful dialogue and conflict resolution. Through such dialogic norms, students form peer-supported learning communities in which knowledge construction is both participatory and social in nature (Murphy and Team 2021). Negotiation of meaning, a process in which students refine their thinking through peer feedback, Reznitskaya and Gregory (2013) emphasise that such negotiation encourages students to reconsider their positions and deepen their understanding through social interaction. Moreover, QT practices encourage interpretive authority, allowing students to pose questions, initiate discussions and lead meaning-making processes. This student agency is particularly valuable in hierarchical or teacher-dominated settings, where QT has been shown to empower students to move from passive recipients to active participants in their education (Murphy and Quality Talk Team 2021).

Emotional engagement and confidence building

Beyond cognitive and social benefits, QT also supports the emotional dimension of learning by making classroom discussions feel more personal and meaningful. Students are encouraged to share ideas connected to their lives, which increases their emotional investment, confidence and sense of belonging. In this way, QT fosters a supportive classroom atmosphere where emotions, personal stories and diverse perspectives are welcomed and legitimised (Lee 2021). Emotional safety in the classroom has been linked to greater student motivation, effort and belief in their academic potential. Dialogic pedagogy, central to QT, cultivates inclusive environments that affirm student identity and encourage active participation, especially in classrooms where students have historically felt marginalised (Alexander 2018).

This emotional and relational foundation is particularly crucial in rural and socio-economically disadvantaged settings, where students often face barriers to engagement. Classrooms that cultivate emotional safety and student connection lead to increased academic engagement and resilience (Zins 2004). The quality of teacher-student and peer relationships has a measurable effect on identity, belonging and academic confidence (Osher et al. 2020). Well-structured dialogue supports this by fostering student voice and validating identity, creating the conditions necessary for academic and personal growth (Resnick et al. 2015).

Comparisons to traditional instruction

QT represents a significant departure from traditional teaching methods, where teachers dominate classroom talk and students are expected to passively listen and recall information. In conventional classrooms, discourse is often structured around closed-ended questions and brief answers, which restricts student agency and stifles the development of critical thinking skills (Applebee et al. 2003). In contrast, QT creates space for students to engage in thoughtful dialogue with peers, ask authentic questions and reflect deeply on complex topics. Empirical studies have shown that QT increases student engagement, encourages transfer of knowledge across

contexts and improves comprehension of challenging texts (Wilkinson et al. 2019). Case studies further illustrate that dialogic approaches such as QT are especially impactful in rural and under-resourced classrooms. In these contexts, QT has been shown to foster student autonomy, curiosity and intellectual agency, transforming passive learning environments into participatory spaces where students feel empowered to express ideas and take academic risks (Wei et al. 2020).

In summary, QT is more than a classroom discussion strategy; it is a pedagogical model that integrates critical thinking, collaboration and emotional support in ways that align powerfully with the principles of HCE. By fostering cognitive engagement through authentic reasoning, strengthening peer relationships through collaborative discourse, and building confidence through emotional safety and voice, QT nurtures the whole student. This holistic approach is important in rural and under-resourced schools, where students often contend with social, economic and psychological barriers. In these settings, QT serves as a developmental scaffold, supporting not only academic achievement, but also resilience, identity affirmation and a sustained sense of belonging. Through its emphasis on agency, inclusion and connection, QT offers a compelling, human-centred alternative to conventional instruction, transforming classrooms into spaces of growth, dignity and possibility.

QT in rural schools: Complexity and adaptation

Rural schools face multiple barriers, poverty, language differences, poor infrastructure and weak policy implementation. These make teaching unpredictable and demanding for both teachers and students. In South Africa, rural students often study in overcrowded classrooms with few qualified teachers and learning resources (Pretorius and Spaull, 2022; Spaull and Taylor 2022). Traditional, one-size-fits-all teaching methods often fail to meet these complex needs. In response, the QT framework was adapted to reflect the local realities of rural education. This locally adapted version, known as *Inkhulumo*, was specifically designed for large class sizes, minimal teaching resources and the necessity of cultural and linguistic relevance. For example, culturally distant references in training

materials—such as a school trip to the Smithsonian Museum, were replaced with relatable alternatives, like a taxi ride to the nearby city of Nelspruit. This grounded adaptation was co-developed by local teachers and student leaders, who were trained in the QT method to ensure the approach was accessible and contextually meaningful. A core innovation of *Inkhulumo* was the implementation of peer-led, small-group discussions. Within these groups, trained student leaders facilitated dialogue using QT prompts, managed turn-taking and encouraged participation from all peers. Importantly, students were allowed to use their home languages during discussions, which not only reduced anxiety, it also validated diverse linguistic identities. This adaptation created inclusive spaces for learning, especially for students who might otherwise feel marginalised in traditional classroom settings. The theoretical promise of QT, promoting interpretive authority and student-centred meaning-making, was clearly reflected in practice. Students who participated in QT discussions began to exhibit increased confidence and engagement beyond the QT sessions. Teachers reported that these students were more willing to ask questions and participate in whole-class discussions. This behavioural shift signals the development of what scholars call interpretive authority, a process whereby students assume responsibility for constructing and negotiating meaning, rather than relying solely on the teacher as the source of knowledge (Wei and Murphy 2017).

Student reflections from the *Inkhulumo* intervention provide compelling, firsthand evidence of this transformation. One student noted the shift in group dynamics: ‘They listen to me and they, they listen to the other people’s ideas and opinions and we argued about the questions, not the people.’ Another described increased confidence and peer collaboration: ‘I was afraid to raise a hand... but now with my group I can tell them that guys, help me, I don’t understand here.’ These statements illustrate how the QT structure promotes not only academic engagement, but also emotional safety and mutual respect. Teachers, too, benefited from QT training. Even in resource-scarce environments, they reported greater clarity in instructional objectives and increased confidence in facilitating student-led discussions. This structured, yet flexible approach allowed rural educators to align their teaching practices with student-centred pedagogical goals

without being overwhelmed by unfamiliar methods (Wei et al. 2018). Challenges like poverty, hunger and limited parental involvement can make learning even harder. QT does not solve these structural issues, however, it helps mitigate their effects. By promoting student voice, peer support and a sense of belonging, QT increases student motivation and engagement. Students report feeling more connected and confident when they are given regular chances to talk, listen and reason together (Omidire and Ayob 2022).

In summary, QT is not a static model, but a dynamic, adaptable pedagogy well-suited to the demands of rural education. By emphasising flexibility, cultural relevance and student voice, QT bridges the gap between abstract policy aims and the realities of rural classrooms. *Inkhulumo* demonstrates that even under challenging conditions, dialogic pedagogy can promote equitable participation, cognitive growth and emotional resilience.

Cultural responsiveness and human-centred instructional design

In complex educational spaces such as rural South African schools, culturally responsive pedagogy is not merely beneficial; it is essential. The linguistic, cultural and socio-economic diversity within these communities demands instructional approaches that are adaptable, inclusive and co-constructed with the very people they intend to serve. The local adaptation, *Inkhulumo*, exemplifies how dialogic pedagogy can respond meaningfully to these imperatives, embedding the principles of HCE in practical, transformative ways. Culturally responsive pedagogy rests on the premise that students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds are assets rather than obstacles to learning. In the South African rural context, where many students navigate across indigenous languages, local knowledge systems and a formal English-medium curriculum, this approach is vital for fostering academic engagement, emotional safety and a strong sense of belonging.

QT accommodates these complexities by structuring dialogue that is both rigorous and flexible. In its *Inkhulumo* form, developed through a participatory research process, QT was not merely implemented, but collaboratively reimaged. Teachers and students were engaged as

co-designers in shaping the pedagogical model. Drawing from iterative cycles of observation, reflection and adaptation, the implementation process ensured that instructional strategies were rooted in local realities. In this way, QT aligned with the HCE call for adaptability and contextual responsiveness.

This co-design approach was not simply about surface-level cultural inclusion; it reoriented the pedagogical power dynamics. Teachers and students were not treated as passive recipients of an externally imposed model, but as active agents in the creation of meaningful educational practice. This aligns with ethical principles of HCE that learning should be participatory and grounded in mutual respect. The *Inkhulumo* adaptation of QT exemplifies a strong alignment with HCE by transforming classroom discourse into a culturally responsive, inclusive and participatory process. Grounded in the principles of student autonomy, co-construction and contextual responsiveness, *Inkhulumo* positions students as active agents in meaning-making, drawing on their home languages, lived experiences and community knowledge. This locally co-designed model disrupts hierarchical teaching norms and fosters relational trust, emotional safety and intellectual agency. By embedding these values in dialogic pedagogy, *Inkhulumo* operationalises HCE in complex rural settings, offering a scalable and ethical approach to educational transformation.

Conclusion and implications for practice

This chapter has demonstrated that QT, particularly in its localised form as *Inkhulumo*, offers a compelling model for advancing HCE in rural schools. By blending critical thinking, relationship-building and cultural relevance, QT transforms classroom culture, creating space for inclusion, student voice and shared meaning-making. Its theoretical foundation is grounded in learning theories that view knowledge as co-constructed through dialogue. This includes Vygotsky's insight that students learn best through guided interaction, and Alexander's framework for dialogic teaching as a vehicle for deep thinking and participation.

However, implementing QT in real-world classrooms, particularly those in rural contexts, is not without difficulty. Teachers often face competing

demands, including overloaded curricula and limited planning time, all of which constrain opportunities for structured dialogue. Additionally, shifting from traditional, monologic instruction to student-centred dialogue requires deep pedagogical change, which can be intimidating for educators accustomed to authoritative classroom roles. The lack of ongoing mentoring and systemic support further impedes sustained adoption. In the *Inkhulumo* study, some teachers initially expressed discomfort with relinquishing control to students and struggled to facilitate open-ended discussion. These challenges highlight the importance of relational trust and professional agency, both central to HCE, where teachers feel supported in experimenting with new practices and are empowered as co-designers of learning. Future recommendations include:

- To embed QT meaningfully in diverse rural classrooms, robust implementation support is essential. This includes co-designed training, peer coaching and leadership buy-in. Educators cannot carry transformation alone; school leaders and policymakers play a crucial role in enabling systemic and sustainable change.
- Embed dialogic pedagogy in national teacher training programmes to ensure that new teachers are equipped to foster student autonomy, participation and voice from the outset (HCE principle: Autonomy, co-construction).
- Support school-level adaptation so rural schools can tailor QT to their local language, culture and constraints, promoting context-sensitive learning experiences (HCE principle: Inclusivity, responsiveness).
- Fund locally-driven research and innovation hubs in rural districts to pilot and evaluate QT-based models like *Inkhulumo*, ensuring educators are engaged as co-researchers (HCE principle: Co-construction, teacher agency).
- Prioritise language inclusivity in learning materials and classroom talk, especially in the early and intermediate phases, to promote equitable access to knowledge and meaningful participation (HCE principle: Inclusivity, epistemic access).
- Reframe monitoring and evaluation systems to include indicators such as relational quality, student participation and dialogic

engagement, not just test performance (HCE principle: Relational trust, holistic development).

In conclusion, QT illustrates that a theoretically robust and practically adaptable pedagogy can meet the needs of real classrooms. It does more than raise achievement, it nurtures student connection, confidence and curiosity. By centring dialogue, culture and care, QT brings HCE to life in schools shaped by complexity and constraint, offering a grounded and ethical path toward inclusive, student-centred education.

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