Paper Title: Providing A 'Holding' Environment To International Students To Promote Successful Adjustment

Liza Ng Monash and Swinburne University

1 Swinburne University, Counselling Service, Mailbag22, John Street, Hawthorn, 3122, Victoria, Australia.   www.swin.edu.au; lng@swin.edu.au
2 Monash University, Education Department, Wellington Street, Clayton, Victoria, 3168, Australia,   www.monash.edu.au, lbng1@student.monash.edu.au

Abstract:

Various factors influence international students' adjustme nt to studying overseas. The ease in which a new language and culture is embraced is a well acknowledged attribute. The other less often recognized and acknowledged aspect is the students' ability to temporary relinquish the comfort of familiar home environment and to manage separation anxiety in order to accommodate to a new culture. Stu dying away from home is a challenging experience often fraught with anxiety.

Winnicott's theory of 'holding' environment provides a good model for ameliorating potential separation as well as psychological problems amongst international students. The con cept of 'holding' proposed by Winnicott is particularly relevant in the experience of International education as going overseas for further studies at a critical developmental stage, before returning home is an interim period to adulthood. 'Holding' refer s to understandi ng and empathy but also to perceived psycho -social support.

Knowledge of the function of 'holding' in International education could contribute not only to an understanding of adjustment but also to an understanding of mental health among the population. Serious mental health problems have been reported among International students and further understanding of preventive measures could reduce the likelihood of mental breakdown. This paper discusses ways to provide a 'holding' environment to assist international students to adjust more successfully to a new culture and country.

Key Words:
International students, adjustment, mental health, personality, Winnicott's 'holding' environment

Introduction:

What does Winnicott mean by a ' holding environment'? How is the concept of 'holding' in therapy relevant in promoting adjustment in international education? How can 'holding' be applied to a university setting? This paper discusses Winnicott's notion of 'holding' and attempts to explo re its relevance to psychological adjustment issues amongst international students.

Developmental and emotional coping difficulties contribute significa ntly to stress and the psychological wellbeing of international students. Ebbin and Blankenship (198 6) reviewed 96 804 diagnoses at a university health centre over 3 years, to compare the number of visits and presenting problems. International students made more visits to the health centre compared to local students and there was an increase in psychiat ric related problems like anxiety and depression being presented amongst the international students. The study found that international students were more emotionally needy a nd tended to present at the health centre for emotional support. This study sugg ests that international students have higher needs for emotional support than the domestic students. The high incidences of emotional stress and psychological symptoms presented by international students indicate that is it essential that preventative mea sures are taken by universities to reduce the likelihood of mental breakdown within a student population that is exposed to high levels of stress. Winnicott's theoretical notion of 'holding' could be applied as a framework for universities to structure emotionally supportive environment as preventative strategies to overcome mental health problems in this

student population. Educators have long known that internal emotional needs interfere with and sabotage the ability to learn and to be creative (Kubie, 1960). Although most universities provide orientation and cultural programs to assist international students to adjust to the host countries, few programs are based on clearly stated goals or an understanding of how emotional support impacts on adjustmen t and academic success. *The aim of this paper is therefore to make the argument for universities to construct more supportive structures based on Winnicott's concept, and to suggest ways for such structures to be build into the university systems so that it facilitates healthy psychological development that is conducive to academic success*. Although a short survey was conducted to provide some insight as to the current environment, this is principally written as a theoretical paper.

What does Winnicott mean by 'holding'?
Firstly, who was Winnicott? Donald Winnicott was an English paediatrician who became interested in psychotherapy and psychoanalytic theories through his observations of maternal -infant relationships. He is known for his conviction tha t devoted maternal care is vital in establishing healthy personality at infancy. Winnicott also promoted the idea that the capacity to play is indicative of p syc hological health and resilience in adulthood (Winnicott, 1971).

What is meant by 'holding'? The concept of 'holding' refers not only to physical holding in the management of infant care but metaphorically, to psychological 'holding'. It is the psychological aspects that will be discussed in this paper. Winnicott's generally wrote on 'holding' in reference to ego integration and therapeutic interactio ns. Discussions of it in this paper however, will be limited to that which is relevant to psychological adjustment to international education.

Winnicott observes that mothers protect by 'holding' together or calming the feelings of anxiety that threaten to overwhelm infants. Modell (1976) cited Freud and Burlingham's (1943) study where in war time 'children were able to remain calm when the mothers were unafraid, despite the real danger' outside (p. 290). The environment is fraught with anxiety for infants as they are not emotionally mature enough to deal with threats from without. Unfamiliar situations are perceived as potential threats and the mother's fu nction is to make sense of the environment and to protect from unthinkable anxiety. 'Holding' therefore is the emotional support that is provided by mother to protect against anxiety (Modell, 1976; Ogden, 2004). The infant is then under the illusion of safety and feels psychologically held in a safe place or sanctuary. In order to provide the function, a mother must have the ability to be empathise and adapt to a baby's condition by providing a background of safety. Winnicott uses the words 'the good enough' mother to suggest that it is natu ral for a mother to be attuned to her infant's needs to provide the basic sustenance that would secure a healthy child. It is implied that it is unnatural for a mother not to have the 'good enough' capacity to care to provide for her infant's basic needs. The basic care that is served by the 'holding' function therefore also refers to empathy; constancy and reliability in environmental provision; through being attuned to physical as well as psychological needs (Abram,). Ogden (2004) summarizes 'holding' as 'safeguarding the continuity of …the experience of being and becoming over time' (p. 1355).

In summary therefore, 'holding' refers to:

Table 1: Function of psychological 'holding'

- *Calming/management (of anxiety)*
- *Caring and protection*
- *Empathy*
- *Constancy and reliability (within the environment)*
- *Attunement and adaptation (to needs)*
- *Safe place or Sanctuary*
- *Nurturing (of developmental needs)*
- *Safe guarding the continuity of being (Ogden, 2004)*

Winnicott observes that the function of 'holding' provid ed by mother during the early stages of infancy is later transferred to objects and phenomena within the immediate environment. He suggests that cultural experiences are located in the environment and can replace the early 'holding' function. Culturally relevant experiences therefore become experiences that have the associative calming effects. The experience of 'holding' is therefore transferred from mother to external phenomena or structures. Winnicott used the terms 'the facilitating environment' to refer to environmental factors that promotes normal progression to maturity.

The relevance of 'holding' in International Education
How is 'holding' relevant to international education? At infancy, the 'holding' function that is initially provided by mothers is essential for emotional development. Psychological stress at this stage could disrupt the acquisition of social and intellectual skills. It can then be argued that the same 'holding' function is just as important at late adolescence, the stage o f transition to adulthood, as it is at infancy. International students often pursue further education overseas at this critical developmental stage. Crises such as adjusting to separatio n from parents and home countries, identity and social issues common ly confront these students. Developmental crises increase the experience of anxiety. The dependency on environmental structures for normal transition to maturity or adulthood is therefore more acute and critical for international students at this stage, since the normal 'holding' support that comes from family, social and cultural experiences are reduced or absent overseas. Smooth transition to adulthood is dependant on perceived emotional and developmentally appropriate psycho - social support from the ho st countries.

If environmental factors that promote psychological health are absent, disruptions to emotional development could have future consequences for the maturity of the self. Severe anxiety or depression could disrupt students' capacity to lear n, or to develop the psycho -social and intellectual skills that are developmentally appropriate. Acute stress as a result of psychological adjustment or transition issues not only interfere with academic achievements, but arrest the intellectual developme nt of the young adults and increase the likelihood for the onset of psychopathology. University environment that are able to provide 'holding' are likely to safeguard against mental health problems amongst these students. A 'holding' environment in inter national education could also facilitate the smooth transition from adolescence to adulthood, encouraging the development of healthy concept of psycho -social and intellectual self. The formation of identity is important for a sound concept of Self.

The questions asked by students and Universities regarding the necessity of providing psychological and developmental support should be the existence of needs, expectations and satisfaction of implied promises made to students and their parents who send the m for further education. The table below summarises specifically how 'holding' is relevant to educational experiences in a foreign country.

Table 2: Relevance of 'holding'

Calming of anxiety	International students are often plagued by feelings of anxiety due to adjustment as well as social and academic pressures
Caring and protection	University life is an interim period between adolescence and adulthood
Empathy	Parents (and sometimes a whole family) pay fo r a student to gain a degree overseas. Cultural compete ncy takes time to adjust to, empathic staff members would increase the capacity cope with difficulties
Constancy and reliability	Disorientatio n in a new place and culture
Attuned to and adaptation to (needs)	Students lack awareness of their own p sycho -social needs. Years of experience with the provision of education to international students should provide the wisdom
Safe place or sanctuary	Academic achievement, exploration of intellectual ideas a nd socialisation with peers
Nurturing	The devel opment of psycho -social and intellectual skills

Continuity of Being	Continuation of developmental process, from where the students left off when separated from their peers/family

Method

Three postgraduate students were asked to provide comments on their experiences to the following questions posed:

1. What support was provided for you when you first arrived?
2. What support did you expect and did not receive?
3. How could the university structure more support to assist you?

The students were selected based on their maturity and their capacity to reflect on their experie nces. The comments were obtained to provide some insights into post -graduate students' experiences as there are few 'holding' structures in research degrees. The purpose of the questi ons were to assess forms of 'holding' support available to students within the current support system and to gain some understanding of where gaps occur in the system. Question 3 provides some direction as to how universities could improve further support for students.

Results

Analyses of the comments suggest that overall there was very little support at the beginning of the students' candidature. There is a lack of one to one or more intimate levels of support or opportunity for social exchanges. However, student C finds the post graduate centre supportive, and it does provide the everyday 'holding' support that she needs. Generally gaps in support appear to occur at departmental level. Students' expectations of departmental support appear not to ha ve been met, both at the supervisory level as well as from the department at large. The students suggest that there should be more empathy for what they are experiencing, more nurturing of intellectual development, constancy in the provision of discussion groups and semi nars; and that department should appear to be more caring about having their expectations met, as well as for future intellectual development of the students.

How to provide the 'holding' structure?

The table below summarises some suggesti ons for Universities to structure 'holding' environments. Traditional university structures i.e., seniors & juniors, and residential college models were initially structured to provide the psychological 'holding' support. Such structures are slowly being eroded due to lack of funding in modern universities. At times, there appears to be a lack of understanding of the importance of the existence of those structures.

Table 3: Strategies for establishing 'holding' structure

Calming of anxiety	First year students to be given priority for residential accommodation Provide specific drop -in areas for regular social/intellectual support and interactions Form groups that students could identify with e.g., senior/junior, special interest groups within discipli nes etc.
Caring and protection	Develop clear purposes and goals on pastoral care, University wide Recruit senior students to watch over juniors Training for senior students and staff members to develop a caring attitude
Empathy	Educating local studen ts and staff on international students' experience
Constancy and reliability	Actively place students in various groups that meet regularly (Formal and informal groups) Training on group interactions and ways to promote positive group interactions
Attunement and adaptation	Get senior students to provide suggestions or run focus groups to find out what are some basic needs that are not fulfilled Greater awareness of the need to provide developmental and intellectual guidance Awareness of the need to provid e intellectual grooming

Safe place or sanctuary	Rregular meeting places in departments, drop -in coffee/tea times
Nurturing	Train senior students to provide pastoral care
	Train staff members to be conscious of the need for pastoral care
	Develop university policies that acknowledges the need to provide general pastoral care

In summary, I would like to put forward the idea that psychological adjustment at university means the capacity to learn and to play, unhindered by emotional or developmental disturbanc es. Students should know that they are being supported to achieve academic success and to participate in social activities. Most support systems at universities assume that by providing opportunity for social interaction, students will be emotionally sup ported. A study by Searle and Ward (1990) found that 'although psychological and sociocultural adjustment are interrelated, there is a need to regard these factors as conceptually distinct' (Searle and Ward, 1990). University support systems should be aw are of the need to provide psychological 'holding' support through social groups. Although social activities and opportunities do provide the 'holding' support, clearly stated goals would guide the attitude and direction of the social groups that are i n place, both at the student as well at staff level.

When I went to UK after completing my undergraduate degree in Australia, I became a residential tutor in one of the colleges. One morning a lecturer rang me about one of his students, the student did n ot show up to sit for her exams. He asked me to knock on her door to see if she is still asleep. I was very surprised by the level of care shown by the lecturer and was of the opinion at that time that there is too much 'baby sitting' in the British system, having come from an Australian educatio n model. I am now of the opinion that there is a need for this kind of attention and care to be structured into the education system, especially at the first year level in order to prevent serious problems from e scalating and to alleviate the current level of psychological problems observed amongst the international students.

If you have a plant in the garden you would watch over it and water it regularly. You would want to direct it to the sunlight in order t o be confident that it would grow into a healthy plant". Winnicott suggests that it is unnatural for a mother not to want to provide the 'holding' function for normal development of her child. So too, at the institutional level, it is unnatural not to be more active in providing the 'holding' structure for students to develop their intellectual selves. International educatio n is the opportunity for seeds of knowledge to be sown in students worldwide, who some day will influence the development of t he whole world. Let us not forget that a caring attitude goes a long way!!

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