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Re-Experiencing Winnicott's Environmental Mother: Implications for Art Psychotherapy of Anti-Social Youth in Special Education

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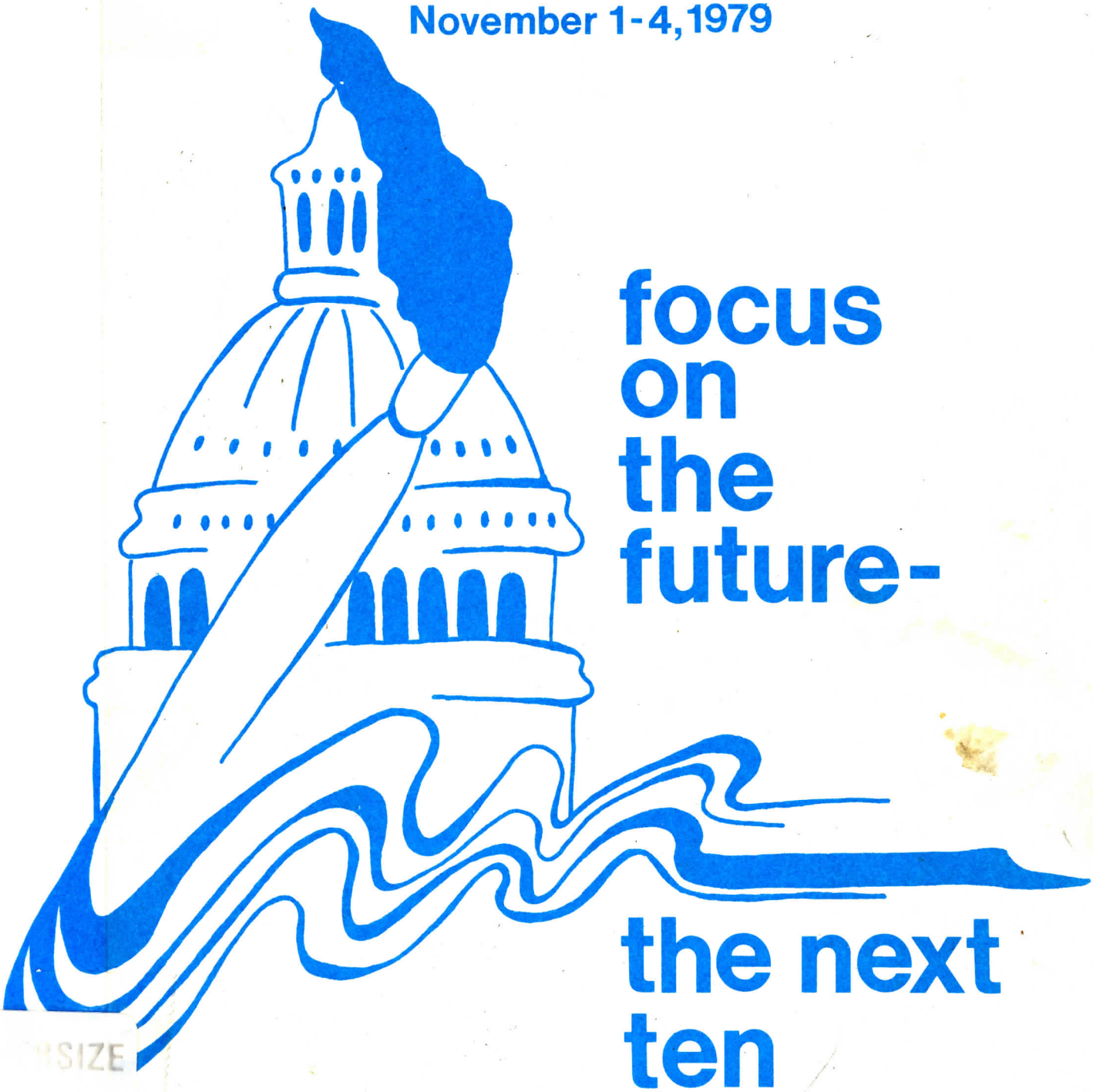

focus on the future- the next ten years

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RE-EXPERIENCING WINNICOTT'S ENVIRONMENTAL MOTHER: IMPLICATIONS FOR ART PSYCHOTHERAPY OF ANTI-SOCIAL YOUTH IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

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(Editor's Note: This paper with 7 illustrations appears in full in Art Psychotherapy, 6:95-102, 1979. Requests for reprints should be sent to Robert Wolf, MPS, ATR, Clinical Director, Henry Street School, 40 Montgomery Street, New York, NY 10001. Please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope.)

Mr. Wolf is the clinical director of the Henry Street School, New York City, a private, non-profit junior and senior high school which uses art therapy as the "primary treatment modality."

Mr. Wolf summarized D.W. Winnicott's theories and his "revolutionary paper" on transitional objects (Winnicott, 1951). In this paper Winnicott describes the phenomenon of the "primary illusion" which blurs the distinction "between the child's wish and its fulfillment," a process that is "essential for later emotional health" as the satisfaction of instinctual needs seems to come from "within." Later breakdown of this illusion "thus becomes fertile ground upon which the child's ability to fantasize gratification grows" and is "seen as the precursor of all creative and spiritual experiences."

The concept of creativity and play as deriving from the primary illusion was presented. In a later paper Winnicott 1958) discussed the child's "capacity to be alone" which is "determined primarily by the mother's ability to provide an environment where the child can feel safe, nurtured and encouraged to explore the world." Closely related to this concept is the idea of the "Environmental Mother."

Winnicott's formulation of the development of the antisocial personality was then summarized. Mr. Wolf described how he used the "conceptual structure" of Winnicott to design interventions and treatment programs for his clients. Two case studies were presented to illustrate the fundamental process by which an individual could safely re-experience and express libidinal impulses.

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