

The Day-care Centre dilemma:

By ROLAND MORRISON

The brown shingled, decrepit old eye-sore in front of Harriet Irving Library is to be torn down next July. At first glance, this seems good news, for the building stands out among the neat brick and concrete of UNB like a wart on a beautiful woman's face. But this building houses the university's Day Care Centre, and when it goes, the Centre may well do likewise unless another building is provided for it.

The building, resembling an old army barracks, was built as a temporary construction during WWII. It has been used by the Day Care Centre since 1968, more by necessity than by design, for it was the only place available for the Centre. It was supposed to have been torn down earlier this year, but the university authorities condescended to give the Centre an extension of life until next July.

Mrs. Donna Poh, who heads the Centre, is a pretty woman trying to do a decent job with inadequate facilities. Her office is a converted stock room, while the staff of eleven must make do with a former junk room. They work an eight hour day, from 8:15 AM until 5 PM. For this, they receive modest salaries, the teachers getting \$350/mo., and the assistants getting \$220/mo.

The staff is well qualified, consisting of teachers, assistants, a cook, and an executive secretary. All the teachers have had courses in a pre-school education and nursery program, and one has an MA in Education. There are no local universities offering such training, and because of this, the Centre has had to bring in people from as far away as Boston.

When the Day Care Centre first took over the building, it was so uninhabitable that the Centre had to borrow \$10,000 from the university to renovate it—tiling, painting, building toilets, classrooms, a kitchen, etc. The loan was paid off last year, and the Centre has now got free use of the building—until June 30, 1972.

At present, 77 children are enrolled at the Centre, ranging in age from two years to five or six years old. The Centre charges parents \$70/mo. to look after their children for a full day five times a week, and \$35/mo. for a half day. Meals are provided for the full day children. Mrs. Poh said she'd like to offer a sliding scale rate for those who can't afford the fees, but the fees are necessary to pay the professional staff. "Babysitting comes cheap," she said, "But we are occupying the minds of the children as well as looking after them." The Centre does not provide merely a babysitting service.

There are two classrooms in the Centre, in which the children are taught various subjects. The older children are taught math and reading readiness to prepare them for school.

The younger children are taught to paint, to recite nursery rhymes, to recognize shapes, sounds, animals and to dress themselves. It is quite an accomplishment to teach a two year old to dress himself. In addition to these, the children cut out paper objects, and paste. They are also given a basic course in French.

By the time the children are too old for the Centre, they have all the tools needed for Grade One. They know all the alphabet and the sounds of the letters, and although they can't read, they are ready to. They are able to count up to 100, although they can conceive only of numbers up to 10.

Mrs. Poh says that the Day Care Centre is helping all Fredericton and not just the university people. Since it operates year-round, the Centre had to take in children from the Fredericton community as well. At present, the enrolment is equally distributed among faculty, student and community children, but the ratio fluctuates.

But the Day Care Centre not only provides a social service, but also provides an academic service. "With the parents' permission," Mrs. Poh stated, "the children are used for observation by the departments of Psychology, Nursing, and Education." The children are invaluable to these departments for research and study purposes.

But although the Centre provides such valuable services, it is plagued by problems. It has few outdoor toys, and those that it does have are in poor shape. It has a set of four or six swings with only two swings on it, two old teeter-totters, a battered sand-box, a small rusted slide, a dilapidated pedal car, and several balls, pails, and trikes. Mrs. Poh pointed out some of the other difficulties the Centre faced:

"It (the building) was the only place where we could find 2000 sq. ft. of space," she said. "We need 4000 sq. ft. to operate a better program for the children. The kitchen equipment is really antiquated. It takes 1 and one-half hours to make a cake. A kitchen range is hardly adequate to cook for sixty people. We have no dishwasher. The outside toys are in sad shape, but they are expensive.

"When it rains, it's a mudhole out there. They keep dumping loads of sand in the yard, but whenever a heavy rain comes, the sand floats down to the parking lot."

She had a couple of comments to make on the building's condition. "The building costs very much to heat—it's extremely drafty. The bathroom is off the kitchen—or the kitchen is off the bathroom! There should be bathrooms off each of the classrooms." Inside the building one has to step gingerly through the narrow halls and crowded rooms. She says the staff could handle 100 children, but there

just isn't enough room. They manage 77 children only because some children come only in the mornings, and others only in the afternoons.

The outlook for the future is bleak. "We can stay here until June 30, but after that we'll need a new building," Mrs. Poh said. "We have no money for land—after our costs are paid we clear only \$100 per month, and when the insurance comes, we have none left."

The Centre is currently negotiating with the University for land, but the outcome doesn't look rosy. Fortunately, there is some interest being shown in the UNB senate. Someone from the Senate was in to see the Centre, and a brief is to be presented at the next Senate meeting. Let's hope the university authorities come to their senses and do something before the Day Care Centre folds.

"If something doesn't come up it will be too bad—six years of experience right down the drain," Mrs. Poh commented.

In contrast to the campus Centre, the Co-op Day Centre seems to be doing quite well. It is located in a first-floor three-bedroom apartment in one of the Montgomery St. Apartment buildings, and has a 2000 sq. ft. playground. The playground is covered with small pebbles, and surrounded by a wooden fence. The outdoor equipment consists of three swings, two teeter-totters, a new eight-foot slide, a climber, and a sand-box. One parent is always on duty when the children use the area.

Mrs. Linda Wong is the only full-time employee of the Centre. She is paid between \$300 and \$400 per month

by the Co-op. She is a former junior high school teacher, and has had no formal pre-school educational training.

She is assisted by at least one volunteer from the Co-op. Not all parents volunteer to mind the children, but some fathers do as well. The Centre works from 9 AM to 1 PM, or from 5 PM to 5 PM. The hours meet to ensure that three people are present to feed the children, whom are too young to feed themselves.

The Centre charges reasonable rates, with special rates for parents who do volunteer work. The fee plans are: 1) \$48 per month if the parents cannot volunteer; 2) \$35 if the parents can put in one hour per week; and 3) \$10 if the parents put in two half days per week. Parents are currently doing the work for the Centre.

The Centre is operating for some time now. This is the first year that it is coordinated entirely by the parents. Previously, it was run by Mrs. Wong, who coordinates the activities of the Centre.

At present, 14 children in the Day Centre, ranging in age from one to five years of age. Most of them are very young, and only 4 of them are three years of age or older. Mrs. Wong has limited the Centre to 14, although there are at least two other Co-op children's centres. The Day

