“Not just somebody’s mother”: University Campus Daycare Co-operatives in Ontario and British Columbia, 1960s to 1970s

Katherine Clare Simon, Department of History, Undergraduate Summer Student Research Fellowship
Supervised by Dr. Lisa Pasolli

Historical Context

University campuses in Canada were home to numerous social movements in the 1960s, including the Women’s Liberation Movement. Struggles for accessible daycare services had been a part of feminist advocacy since the post-war period (Pasolli, 2015). This period saw some daycare advocacy in Toronto, but this ultimately collapsed in the 1950s (Prentice, 1989). Although many still believed that women should concentrate on working within the home, the women’s liberation movement and the increasing numbers of women in university and in the workplace in the 1960s provided the stage for more vocal feminist daycare advocacy (Rebick, 2005).

Figure 1. Headline from the Queen’s *Journal*, April 4, 1973.

Research Questions

- How were university daycare co-operatives connected to the women’s liberation movement?
- On what ideological bases were these co-ops created?
- How did the radical ideas of the co-ops adapt to or challenge the liberal institutions of the university and the government?

The Co-ops

The Simon Fraser University Co-operative Family:

- One of the first university-based co-operative daycare centres to emerge in Canada.
- “The need for daycare was *now*,” explained Melody Killian, one of the parents involved with the creation of the co-operative.
- The “Co-operative Family” was run on the spirit of reciprocity.
- Licensing would require a qualified supervisor and a constitution.
- Hiring a supervisor would go against the ideological basis of the co-operative as a centre with shared responsibility for each child.

“We have gone against the grain of every tendency in this society- the tendency to set up leaders and followers, to own property exclusively (including children), to be, first and foremost, individuals”

-Melody Killian, SFU Co-operative Family

- However, with no other childcare services on campus, parents looking for childcare had no choice but to use the co-operative. Many of these parents were not committed to the radical ideas on which it was based.
- When parents stopped participating in volunteer shifts and the consensus model of decision-making, a supervisor was hired.
- The co-operative hired a supervisor and raised its cost in order to receive a provincial license.
- Although The Family adapted to the liberal institution of the provincial government, it sparked a discussion about childcare on campus. The university to expand daycare facilities and the provincial government agreed to license a centre for children under the age of three, the first in British Columbia.

The Queen’s Co-operative Day Care Centre:

- Opened in 1970 in the Student Union Building.
- Unlike the SFU Family, the Queen’s Co-operative began operation with a trained nurse, suggesting that it was based on less radical ideals.
- Similarly to the SFU Family, the focus was on giving children as much freedom as possible.
- By 1972, the co-operative aspect of the daycare was falling apart. The supervisor at the time, Jenny Lowther, remarked that, “lots of responsibility is being placed on a few.”
- In response, the centre added an additional fee for parents who could not fulfill their volunteer responsibilities in the centre.
- The University supplied the house at 76 Queen’s Crescent to the daycare rent-free. This was likely because by 1972, the university administration had recognized the benefit of a campus daycare for recruiting potential students.
- However, the daycare did face difficulties with the province and the university.
- By 1973, the daycare had a deficit of \$500. This is partially due to the fact that City of Kingston regulations restricted funding for children whose parents were both students. As a result, the daycare was ineligible for 20% municipal funding and in turn, 80% cost-sharing funding from the provincial government.
- In addition, the fact that the centre relied on the university for accommodation created uncertainty. The planned move out of 76 Queen’s Crescent and into a permanent facility was delayed.

“We can’t go much further without something more definite than we’ve had in the past from Queen’s. I think we are almost at a stalemate.”

-Jenny Lowther, Queen’s Co-operative Daycare Centre

University of Toronto Campus Co-operative Community Daycare:

- In the spring of 1969, students involved with the Women’s Liberation Group surveyed for interest for a daycare centre at the University of Toronto.
- Although the university denied that there was any available space, the daycare occupied 12 Sussex Drive and declared it the new home of the daycare.
- The centre aimed to provide children with freedom and also provide a space for men to participate in childcare, thereby challenging sexism.

- In order to become licensed, the daycare was told it needed to complete \$2000 in renovations.
- In the Spring of 1970, 200 parents, children, and supporters occupied Simcoe Hall, the administrative centre of the university, to demand the money for renovations.
- University President Claude Bissel initially denied any responsibility to the centre stating the university was “not a social welfare agency.” A university-wide debate emerged over whether the university had any responsibility for childcare for its staff and students. Bissel eventually gave in to the occupiers’ demands.
- Receiving a license took the centre 3 years, an appeal process, and the decision to hire a trained staff member, sacrificing the true co-operative nature of the centre.
- By 1971, the daycare needed more space. Once again, they were told that the university would not provide it.
- On April 5th, 1972, three parents broke into the meteorological building. What followed was a ten-month occupation which eventually resulted in 2 new daycare centres, the co-operative Devonshire centre and the university-run Margaret Fletcher Daycare.

Figure 2. Parents, supporters, and children occupy the University of Toronto meteorological building in 1972 to demand space for a new daycare centre.

Conclusion

The university co-operatives examined were deeply influenced by the New Left and Women’s Liberation Movements. Co-operatives challenged and adapted to the pressures of liberalism within the university and the provincial governments in which they operated. They also challenged the nuclear family and the gendered division of care work. However in the end, they would be co-opted by university administration. Despite their inability to continue as co-operatives, these experiments in accessible and affordable daycare laid the groundwork for the recognition of the importance of childcare on university campuses and the responsibility of institutions to provide it.

Archival sources consulted: Queen’s University Archives, Canadian Women’s Movement Archives (University of Ottawa), Simon Fraser University Online Archives.

Further Reading: Mahon, Rianne. “The Never-Ending Story: The Struggle for Universal Child Care Policies in the 1970s.” *The Canadian Historical Review* 81, no.4 (2000): 582-622.; Pasolli, Lisa. *Working Mothers and the Childcare Dilemma: A History of British Columbia’s Social Policy*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015.; Prentice, Susan. “Workers, Mothers, Reds: Toronto’s Postwar Daycare Fight.” *Studies in Political Economy* 30 (1989): 115-141.; Rebick, Judy. *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution*. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2005.