CHAPTER ONE
THE PROBLEM

1.0 Introduction

Many preschool programmes have been developed over time resulting in different preschool emphasizing on different approaches. Some educators see preschool primarily as a socializing experience for children to adjust to life in the primary school later. Some educators believe that this experience enhances the cognitive processes. Others believe that preschool should focus more on teaching academic skills. There are also educators who believe in cultivating a holistic development for the children.

Basically, there are two types of approaches that are often contradicting each other in terms of philosophy, educational goals, content of syllabus, activities, and so forth. One is the child-initiated learning approach, and the other is the teacher-directed instruction approach. Child-initiated learning is often used interchangeably with the term child-centered learning (Santrock, 1998; Egerton, 1987; Stevens, 1976). Child-initiated learning is often viewed as a broader construct than child-centered learning because it includes more frequent social interaction with peers and teachers.

The debate on which type of preschool programme, either child-initiated learning or teacher-directed instruction, is able to provide the most appropriate early childhood education to the young children has never been resolved (Marcon, 1990; Egerston, 1987; Spodek, 1989). The reason being their contradicting views on different educational concepts and goals, the role of the teachers, the classroom setting and activities, and so forth as well as the outcomes of its educational process on various developmental aspects of the children.
Several studies have been conducted to compare the differences and outcomes of child-initiated learning and teacher-directed instruction preschool programmes on children before and after they enter elementary schools and until the adolescent years. Recent research findings and expert opinions seem to favour child-initiated learning approach (Marcon, 1990, 1993; Burts, Harts, Renee, Charlesworth, Fleege, & Mosley, 1990; Burts, Harts, Charlesworth, Fleege, Mosley, & Thomasson, 1992; DeVries, Reese-Learned, & Morgan, 1991; Dunn & Kontos, 1997; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988; Schweinhart, 1997; Gotlieb, Lennox, Kronitz, Allan, Hart and Read 1993; Battistich, Solomon, & Deluchi, 1990; Gersten & Keating, 1987; Elicker & Marthur, 1997; Stallings, 1976).

These studies, however, do not measure socioemotional behaviors comprehensively. Among the social, emotional, or behavioral variables studied are adaptive behaviors (Marcon, 1990, 1993), stress behaviors (Burts et al., 1990; Dunn & Kontos, 1997), delinquent behaviors, grade retention and school dropouts (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988, Schweinhart, 1997), creativity and self-concept (Stallings, 1976; Gersten & Keating, 1987; Elicker & Marthur, 1997), peer acceptance and social adjustment (Battistich et al., 1990), sociomoral development (DeVries et al. (1991), achievement motivation (Dunn & Kontos, 1997) and locus of control (Stephens, 1973). Relatively little has been done to investigate the differences of social skills and problem behaviors of the children in these two different programmes although such investigation has been done once by Battistich et al. (1990).

It is important to find out the socioemotional behaviors of children in these two programmes because researches have proven that early focus on the academic would
harm the students in life later, especially in the sphere of social behaviors (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988; Dunn & Kontos, 1997). If it is the fact, it would be interesting to further investigate these phenomena at preschool age as well. Moreover, short- and long-term studies of the outcomes of preschool programmes on children’s learning readiness, aptitude, and academic achievement are vast, but not for the socioemotional behaviors.

Socioemotional behaviors are complex because they involve interactions from various domains. Smart and Smart (1978), for instance, ascertain that nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, gestures, or posture; perspective-taking, that is, taking the point of view of another person; empathy which refers to being able to perceive how another person is thinking and feeling; social interaction which includes interaction with adults and peers; caring for others such as altruism; problem behaviors such as anger, aggression, fear or anxiety; socio-moral behavior; and so forth can influence socioemotional behavioral patterns of preschool age children.

Within the areas of adaptive and maladaptive behaviors, Merrell (1994, 1995, 1996) outlines two domains of socioemotional behaviors, that is, social skills and problem behaviors. These two domains shall be taken as the specific foci of this study.

Chiam (1995) notes that the ages of five to six years are critical to the acquisition of social skills and the formation of friendship. Hence, the role of socialization is important among early school age children. Socialization is a continuous process and is often underestimated by some parents and educators. In fact, Dodge, Goldhammer, & Colker (1990) has stressed that socially acceptable skills and behaviors can be nurtured in a developmentally appropriate environment. The inability
of the children to cope and adapt to the preschool environment can be seen through their poor social skills and is often manifested through their problem behaviors.

Therefore, an appropriate preschool environment is essential to the socioemotional development of the children especially when they begin to have intimate contact with teachers and peers, other than their parents and siblings.

1.1 Definitions

This chapter includes the definitions of socioemotional behaviors, and the descriptions of the teacher-directed instruction approach, the Montessori approach and the theme learning approach. The variables have been operationalized as follow:

(a) Socioemotional Behaviors

The definition of socioemotional behaviors of this research is based upon Merrel's conceptualization and researches on the social, emotional and behavioral assessment in early childhood, particularly of children ages three to six. For social skills dimension, Merrell (1994, 1995) includes social cooperation which consists of cooperation and self-restraint behaviors, social interaction which consists of social initiation behavior, and social independence which consists of gaining independence within peer group. As for problem behaviors, is consistent with the theoretical and empirical breakdown of the internalizing-externalizing dichotomy. Merrell (1994, 1995) groups the externalizing problems into three subdomains which are the self-centered/explosive, attention problems/overactive, and antisocial/aggressive subdomains. The internalizing problems include two subdomains of social withdrawal, and anxiety/somatic problems.
(b) The Teacher-Directed Instruction Approach

The teacher-directed instruction programme has clearly defined intellectual goals and set priority for the achievement of academically oriented subjects such as mathematics, languages, moral and science. The content of syllabus usually emphasizes specific pre-academic skills rather than the total aspects of development of the children.

In a teacher-directed instruction model, the typical role of the teacher is to initiate learning activities, and the role of the child is to respond to what teacher offers. The teacher transmits spoken and written information to children and checks to make sure the information has been received through drilling of worksheets, colouring books, workbooks, flashcards, and other abstract or two-dimensional learning materials. Reading and writing instruction emphasizes direct teaching of letter recognition, reciting the alphabet, colouring within the lines, and being instructed in the correct formation of letters. Rote learning often occurs during the lesson, thus, memorization and drilling activities are emphasized. Art project usually involves colouring predawn forms, copying an adult-made model, or finishing a project the teacher has started. The teacher virtually tells the children exactly what to do and when to do it. The flow of information is mainly from teacher to students. If the work is corrected, errors are usually pointed out by teacher. Hence, the teacher expects the children to follow her plans. Teacher virtually expects the children to complete same paced of works given to them in a set period of time. Classroom environment is typically close-ended. Lessons are usually conducted in a large group. Children perform the same tasks together. The teacher expects children to sit down, watch, be quiet, and listen, or follow instruction. When teachers try to get children involved in activities, they do so by requiring their
participation, rewarding them, or disapprove them for not participating. Learning climate seldom provide and promote bigger opportunities for independence, and the exploration and development of peer relationships (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Rescorla, 1990; Spodek, 1989; Stallings, 1987; Burt et al., 1990, 1992; Becker & Gersten, 1982; Meyer, Gersten, & Gutkin, 1983; Gersten & Keating, 1987; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988; Marcon, 1990; Stevens, 1976; Gestwicki, 1995; Santrock, 1998).

(c) The Montessori Approach

The fundamental principle of the Montessori approach (Orem, 1974; Santrock, 1998; Seefelt, 1977; Standing, 1967; Miller & Dyer, 1976; Rohaya Hj. Yahya, 1996), a child-centered programme, is based on the principle of freedom in a prepared environment. Although specific pre-academic skills can be acquired in the course of the programme, the primary educational objective is the development of fundamental cognitive processes and concepts, rather than specific pre-academic skills.

Learning occurs through the child’s active and largely intrinsically motivated involvement in an environment structured by the teacher. The abilities of the students are determined by their performance on tasks. The programme prepares the children for independence, develop concentration, co-ordination, self-esteem, orderliness in the classroom, and care of the environment. The classroom setting encourages self-discipline. The schedule of activities is quite flexible although different activities are being scheduled at different times. In most of the cases, teacher supervises activities rather than provides direct answer to the children. The flow of information regularly
comes from interaction with the environment, teacher-to-child, child-to-child, or child-to-teacher. The children have unlimited interaction with their peers.

It is through this framework that teacher maintains the purposefulness and direction of the programmes. However, the child will be given considerable freedom and spontaneity in choosing activities and is allowed to move from one to another activity as he or she wishes. The teacher shows the child how to perform intellectual activities, demonstrates interesting ways to explore curriculum materials, and offers help when the child requests it. In the other words, the nature of instruction is independent and personalized. Montessori didactic materials have been designed to correspond with sensory development and rely less heavily on textbooks and workbooks.

(d) The Theme Teaching Approach

Theme teaching is an approach whereby the child is given an opportunity to learn through active exploration of hands-on teaching methods as children develop at varying rates. The theme teaching approach focuses on improving children’s cognitive development as well as their social, emotional, and physical development. Educators refer to this type of schooling as developmentally appropriate practice, which is based upon the typical development of children within an age span (age appropriateness) as well as the uniqueness of the child (individual appropriateness) (Bredekamp, 1987).

A child-initiated learning approach can be referred to as a developmentally appropriate practice. Through developmentally appropriate practice (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek and Rescorla, 1990; Gestwicki, 1995), the child has the opportunity to exert
some control over the teacher and the learning situation. Children in a child-initiated learning approach would form a closer relationship with adults as compared to the children who only wait for teacher's instruction. During developmentally appropriate practice lessons, the teacher functions as a facilitator who stimulates and expands any learning possibilities, responding to children's interest and ability. Teacher asks questions that encourage the children to give more than one right answer. Children are involved in concrete, three-dimensional learning activities, with materials that are closely related to children's daily life experiences. Instead of focusing narrowly on developing intellectual skills through drilling of worksheets, teacher presents activities such as block building, measuring ingredients for cooking, self-help skills, gardening, science experiments, water-play, dough-play, drawing, and so forth to help the children learn concepts about mathematics, science, and social studies. Direct teaching largely through abstract, paper-and-pencil activities presented to large groups of young children is believed to be developmentally inappropriate and not child-initiated. When teachers want the children to get involved in activities, they do so by stimulating children's natural curiosity and interest. Nonetheless, children still have planned lessons in writing with pencils, colouring, tracing lines, or correct use of scissors but they are encouraged to express and explain what they have done on those exercises. Children may freely move around, much of the time, to many areas in the classroom. Children work individually or in small, child-chosen groups most of the time. Children are allowed to do different things. The sound of the environment is seen as pleasant conversation, spontaneous laughter, and exclamations of excitement. Teachers use
redirection, positive reinforcement, and encouragement as guidance or discipline techniques.

One of the activities of developmentally appropriate practice is thematic-play approach. The teacher chooses a central theme and an array of activities is built around this theme. When children find a common thread around much of their play, they are able to make linkages between the individual bit of information to build concepts. Teacher may add on the ideas that develop, and help children to visualize the connections that children may make between related concepts. An advantage of thematic-play is that a variety of means of exploring a concept via different methods and media are available; and if a particular activity does not interest or fit the specific learning style of a child, there are other methods of exploring the same idea. Theme learning also allows children to immerse themselves in a topic that is of deep interest to them. Play centered on a particular theme may last weeks, or even months, depending on sustained attention.

1.2 Problem Statement

Variations exist in early childhood education. Should school be imparting direct knowledge to children or should it be emphasizing on the holistic development of the children? The following are two different views on preschool programmes.

Firstly, some advocates emphasize on what students learn and stress that preschool should emphasize the teaching of intellectual skills through academic subjects such as languages, mathematics, and science. They believe that a teacher-centered oriented classroom, such as teacher-directed instruction approach, is able to provide the best education for the children (Becker and Gersten, 1982; Gersten and
Keating, 1987). Secondly, other educators, argue that while imparting the knowledge, the teacher-centered approach fails to recognize the social, emotional, and physical needs of the students. They believe that although the teacher-centered approach may sometimes result in higher levels of achievement when the children enter into primary school as well as may improve the children’s academic achievement later, it has potential damaging effects. An increase in academic pressure would harm the children, such as resulting in an increase in stress-related behaviors, engaging in antisocial or delinquent behaviors, higher anxiety, higher risk of dropping out from school, and less positive attitude toward schools (Marcon, 1990, 1993; Flynn, 1990; Burts et al., 1990, 1992; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988; Hirsch-Pasek, 1991; Dunn & Kontos, 1997; DeVries et al., 1991).

The educators who believe in child-initiated learning approach argue that the function of education should meet the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical needs of the children (Egertson, 1987; Spodek, 1989; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1988). They believe in how students learn rather than what they learn. Educational process should stress on thinking skills. Students should learn how to think independently and critically. In-depth projects (such as thematic-play) should replace standardized drilling exercises, homework and tests. They also believe that education should involve more hands-on instruction in which the children can actively involve in discovering knowledge rather than having it drilled into them. Teacher should act as a facilitator in helping students with those hands-on projects. Teacher should encourage children to ask inquisitive questions and to use knowledge in thoughtful ways. Interactions with peers are also encouraged. They believe this approach will not only foster the cognitive
processes and development of the children, but also able to meet the physical, social and emotional ends.

We have discussed the controversy involved in child-initiated learning and teacher-directed instruction preschool programmes. Thus, it would be interesting to investigate which approach is more appropriate. Although foreign studies have confirmed that the teacher-directed instruction environment is potentially detrimental to children in various aspects of development as compared to child-initiated learning environment, the answer is still unclear at present especially on the matters regarding the social skills and problem behaviors of children. It is also unclear as to whether the child-initiated learning approach is better than the teacher-directed instruction approach because most of the social, emotional, and behavioral variables studied are not consistent enough to represent the socioemotional construct. The findings are also not comprehensive enough to enable us to make generalization peculiar to preschool children. In view of this, there is an urgency to investigate the differences of socioemotional behaviors of children in these two different programmes.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The following are the objectives of the study:

1. To compare the patterns of socioemotional behaviors of young children in two different preschool programmes, namely, the Montessori/thematic-play approach and the teacher-directed instruction approach.
2. To assess the social, emotional, and behavioral problems of children in these two programmes for the purpose of identifying appropriate early childhood interventions.

3. To investigate the gender differences on socioemotional behaviors for the whole sample, and more specifically to seek information regarding the gender differences pertaining to the socioemotional behaviors in two different programmes.

1.4 Research Questions

The central question in this study is to investigate the differences of socioemotional behaviors between the children who have attended a child-initiated learning programme as compared to those who have attended a teacher-directed instruction programme. Pertaining to the objective of the study, the following two main research questions are:

1. Do children who attend the Montessori/thematic-play programme and teacher-directed instruction programme differ on their social skills?
2. Do children who attend the Montessori/thematic-play programme and teacher-directed instruction programme differ on their problem behaviors?

Subsequently, the following research questions which intend to examine gender differences:

1. Do the boys and girls of the whole sample differ in terms of their social skills and problem behaviors?
2. Do boys and girls in Montessori/thematic-play programme and boys and girls in teacher-directed instruction programme differ in terms of their social skills and problem behaviors?

3. Do boys in Montessori/thematic-play programme and boys in teacher-directed instruction programme differ in terms of their social skills and problem behaviors?

4. Do girls in Montessori/thematic-play programme and girls in teacher-directed instruction programme differ in terms of their social skills and problem behaviors?

1.5 Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is confined to the teachers’ ratings on socioemotional behaviors of forty-three five-year-old preschool children from a Montessori/thematic-play programme and thirty six-year-old preschool children from a teacher-directed instruction programme.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Social adjustment and problem behaviors are not only indicators of children at risk in life later but also important for the present situation. Therefore, appropriate social, emotional and behavioral development should be cultivated at a young age. This research will benefit not only the children but also the parents and teachers as well as in anticipating the negative outcomes of inappropriate choice of preschool programme. Since there is a lack of empirical comparative studies on the outcomes of child-initiated
learning programme and teacher-directed instruction programme on young children’s socioemotional behaviors as we have discussed earlier, this research will also benefit a number of people who are interested in the development of early childhood education.

Although developmentally appropriate practice is the recent trend of preschool education, it faces numerous and long-standing challenges. Among the critiques are as follow: (a) it is only a philosophy and just in sequence with the changing trends in education. Teachers are not being asked to change everything they do, but instead they are being asked to integrate actions that are in line with their knowledge about the development of the children; (b) the classroom are unstructured; and (c) teachers teach minimally and there is no way to tell if the children are learning because it does not include academics goals or objectives (Gestwicki, 1995; Cummins, 1998). Hopefully, this research would serve as a useful reference in order to justify the quality of developmentally appropriate practice in the aspects of socioemotional behaviors of the children.

Lastly, it is also hopeful this research would give important insight and information for other short- and long-term studies because the preschool experiences may affect a child’s social, emotional and behaviors in primary schools, and extending through secondary schools until adulthood. Spivack (1986) has demonstrated a consistent relationships between early classroom behaviors and later misconducts.