In a Japanese preschool, at lunchtime, a teacher constantly helps children by cutting food into small pieces, feeding children, and opening containers. She does not ask the children whether they need help and they do not ask for help. Instead, she closely observes the children and anticipates and interprets their needs.

In a U.S. preschool, at lunchtime, a teacher notices that some children are struggling with their juice box straws and says, “Let me know if you’d like my help.” One child approaches her, exclaiming, “I can’t do this; can you do this for me?” The teacher responds, “I will come right over and help you.”

These anecdotes, as well as evidence reviewed below, suggest cultural differences in sensitivity: Japanese caregivers (parents and teachers) emphasize the importance of anticipating children’s needs based on subtle and indirect cues, including situational factors, and U.S. caregivers emphasize the importance of responding to children’s explicit expression of need. The major goals of this article are: 1) to review studies providing anecdotal and indirect evidence that these differences exist, and 2) to report findings from a study that directly tests the cultural differences.

It is important to note that no prior studies...
have directly examined cultural differences in anticipation versus responsiveness. It also should be noted that prior work on cultural differences in sensitivity has focused on parent-child relationships in the home. We are not aware of any prior reports bearing on cultural differences in teachers’ anticipation versus responsiveness. (Throughout this article, we use the shorthand terms “anticipation” and “responsiveness” to refer to the distinction between proactive behavior based on children’s subtle and indirect cues, including situational factors, and behavior that is reactive to children’s explicit expression of need.)

**Parental Sensitivity and Child Security**

Before examining cultural differences in sensitivity, it is important to note the pivotal role of sensitivity in socialization outcomes. Several major theories of child development depict caregivers’ sensitivity as a key element in the development of the child’s well-being (Baumrind & Thompson, 2002; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sensitivity is typically defined as alertness to children’s signals and appropriateness, consistency, and promptness of response to those signals (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Keller, Yovsi, & Voelker, 2002). Sensitivity has been linked to various markers of later well-being, including social competence and the ability to self-regulate, but has most frequently been linked to attachment security.

Western attachment investigators have demonstrated that insecure children are more likely to have parents who respond negatively to children’s explicit signals or who are inconsistently responsive or consistently unresponsive to such signals, especially in stressful situations (van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999). While Western attachment investigators acknowledge cultural differences in specific behaviors, these investigators claim that the nature of child security and caregiver sensitivity is universal (van IJzendoorn & Sagi, 1999; Waters, Vaughn, Posada, & Kondo-Ikemura, 1995). By contrast, cultural investigators point to fundamental differences in security between Western and non-Western cultures, and they link the differences in security to larger distinctions, such as between independent and interdependent conceptions of self (Miller, 2003; Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000), and between individualistic and context-dependent views of relationships (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). Below, we review evidence of differences in parents’ sensitivity that relate to differences in children’s security.

**Cultural Differences in Sensitivity**

As the preschool examples at the beginning of this article suggest, sensitivity in the West, and in the United States in particular, may have more to do with responsiveness to children’s explicit expression of need. Western caregivers may expect children to verbally express their desires (e.g., by explicitly stating, “Help me open my juice box”) and they may be reluctant to respond to children’s needs prior to receiving such requests. Not surprisingly, then, Western investigators often use the terms “sensitivity” and “responsiveness” interchangeably. By contrast, sensitivity in non-Western communities, and in Japan in particular, may have more to do with anticipation of children’s needs and receptivity to subtle and nonverbal cues. Japanese caregivers may believe that it is their duty to anticipate children’s needs, such as the need to open a juice box, before the child is even able to express the need (e.g., based on situational cues and knowledge of the child). In Japan, it is easy to see how the constructs of sensitivity and anticipation are viewed interchangeably. In this article, we treat sensitivity as an overarching construct that subsumes both responsiveness to explicit cues, which we believe is more valued and emphasized in the West, and anticipation based on subtle and nonverbal cues, which we believe is more valued and emphasized in non-Western communities.

The link between sensitivity and responsiveness is evident in Ainsworth et al.’s (1978) definition of the sensitive mother
as one who “is alert to perceive her baby’s signals, interprets them accurately, and responds appropriately. . . . [S]he makes her responses temporally contingent upon the baby’s signals” (p. 142). Maternal sensitivity, in the context of individualistic, middle-class Anglo culture, includes the value of “following the child’s lead and allowing the child to guide maternal behavior and make a variety of choices” (p. 142). “High levels of maternal control in interactions are experienced as overstimulating and intrusive and are associated with avoidant Strange Situation behavior at 12 months” (Carlson & Harwood, 2003, p. 237).

Non-Western communities typically hold different assumptions and conclusions about sensitivity. In cultural groups that emphasize interdependence over individual autonomy, as among the Japanese, evidence indicates that the concept of sensitive maternal care includes the expectation that mothers will structure and guide the infant’s environment and behavior to enhance appropriate social behaviors and family relationships (Harwood, Schoelmerich, Schulze, & Gonzalez, 1999). For example, in Puerto Rico, maintaining persistent physical control and placing strong limits on infant behavior are not considered insensitive to the infant’s development of autonomy, but rather as evidence of positive efforts to raise a well-behaved, respectful child (Barnett, Kidwell, & Leung, 1998; Harwood, 1992; Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995).

Teaching infants to be attentive, calm, and well behaved requires considerably more physical prompting and control than teaching infants to be assertive and self-confident [the goal of Anglo-American caregivers]. Thus, it appears that maternal use of physical control may be regulated by maternal socialization goals in a meaningful predictable manner among these Puerto Rican and Anglo participants. (Carlson & Harwood, 2003, p. 67)

Similarly, Korean mothers are more likely than Canadian mothers to adopt a controlling form of sensitivity in which they are interactional leaders and the children are followers (Choi, 1992). Korean mothers “constantly check, direct, or speak for the children.” They function as if they and their children are “in a fused state . . . neither the mothers nor the children are recognized as independent individuals” (p. 120). The Canadian mothers are more likely to differentiate themselves from their children. “There is no intrusion of the mothers’ reality into the children’s” (p. 114). “Canadian mothers . . . perceive their child’s utterance as an independent assertion of their communicative partner” (p. 120).

These efforts to control are rarely responsive to children’s explicit signals. More often they occur prior to or in opposition to children’s signals, are based on a child’s very subtle cues, or are dictated by situational cues and requirements (norms regarding appropriate behavior in the specific context). That is, they are not responsive to explicit signals by the child. According to Keller et. al. (2002) the Nso of Cameroon illustrate this pattern. The Nso mother-child dyad “does not follow a communicative dialogue model where the child is accorded a quasi-equal status in the interactional process, but rather follows a tutoring and apprenticeship model of socialization where the adult caregiver stimulates the desired developmental outcomes. . . . [The] Nso approach toward negative states is not so much responsive but [rather] anticipatory to infants’ distress signals” (p. 411). For example, “When a baby opens the mouth, the first thing is to put the nipple in” (p. 411). Similarly, among the Gusii of Kenya, LeVine (2004, pp. 154-155) observes that mothers’ proximity makes them more attuned to their children’s indirect, subtle, and nonverbal cues. The Gusii mother breastfeeds “at the child’s first fret, before it became a full blown cry.” Greater anticipation of infants’ needs, as opposed to responsiveness to infants’ signals, also has been observed in Zinacanteco Indians (Brazelton, Robey, & Collier, 1969). However, the evidence in all three of these cases is anecdotal.

The above investigators suggest that sensitivity in non-Western as compared to
Western cultures entails a relatively high degree of parent-child unity, parental control, leading, and tutoring (as opposed to individuation, autonomy-fostering, following the child's lead, and partnering with the child). According to Keller et al. (2002), a key factor underlying these differences in control and unity is non-Western caregivers' focus on anticipation of needs based on subtle and nonverbal cues, as contrasted with Western caregivers' focus on responding to the explicit expression of needs. Unfortunately, no direct tests of this hypothesis exist.

U.S.-Japanese Differences in Sensitivity
As compared to Japanese mothers, U.S. mothers exhibit more positive responses to children's bids for autonomy (Dennis, Cole, Zahn-Waxler, & Mizuta, 2002), they are more likely to promote infant autonomy, and their interactions more often foster physical and verbal independence—by focusing on objects in the environment, for example (Bornstein et al., 1992). By contrast, Japanese mothers are more sensitive than U.S. or German mothers to infants' bids for indulgence (Azuma, Kashiwagi, & Hess, 1981), they are more sensitive with regard to infants' negative emotional states (Barratt, 1996), and they are more likely to see the infant as an extension of themselves and to try to foster mutual dependence—by focusing on the child per se, for example (Bornstein et al., 1992). These and related findings (Friedlmeier & Trommsdorff, 1998; Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000; Trommsdorff & Friedlmeier, 1993) highlight cultural differences in the goals of sensitivity—to foster either independence and autonomy or interdependence and mutuality.

Because Japanese caregivers highly value empathy, they prefer to anticipate children's needs by relying on situational cues and thereby counteracting stress before it arises (Clancy, 1986; Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake, & Morelli, 2000; Tobin, 1995; Trommsdorff, 1999). Japanese mothers, as compared to German mothers, are more likely to vary their sensitivity to children's needs as a function of situational demands (Friedlmeier & Trommsdorff, 1998).

Clancy (1986) provides rich anecdotal evidence of Japanese mothers' use of empathy to obtain a state of symbiotic union during communicative exchanges with their toddlers

In Japan, the ideal interaction is not one in which the speakers express their wishes and needs adequately and listeners understand and comply, but rather one in which each party understands and anticipates the needs of the other, even before anything is said. . . . The speaker presumes upon the listener's willingness to cooperate, empathize and intuit what he or she has in mind. (p. 217)

Japanese mothers' empathy and anticipation reduces the child's motivation and opportunities to vocalize, as well as their own opportunities for responsiveness. In Western communities, caregivers prefer to wait for their children to communicate their needs before taking steps to meet those needs (Clancy, 1986; Rothbaum, Weisz, et al., 2000; Tobin, 1995; Trommsdorff, 1999). These findings suggest that sensitivity in collectivistic communities (e.g., Japan) has more to do with meeting needs for emotional closeness and helping infants regulate their emotional states, whereas sensitivity in individualistic communities (e.g., the United States) has more to do with balancing children's needs to be cared for with their autonomous efforts to satisfy their own needs (Keller, Völker, & Zach, 1997; Rothbaum, Weisz, et al., 2000; Vogel, 1991).

In communities where collectivistic values (e.g., empathy, conformity, and sensitivity to cues of others) are prioritized, such as Japan, caregiver-child communication is more nonverbal, intuitive, and indirect, with a focus on the listener's (receiver's) responsibility to be sensitive (Clancy, 1986; Mizuta, Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Hiruma, 1996; Tobin, 1995; Toda, Fogel, & Kawai, 1990). For the Japanese, "the ideal interaction is not one in which the speakers express their wishes and needs adequately and listeners understand and comply, but rather one in which
each party understands and anticipates the needs of the others, even before anything is said” (Clancy, 1986, p. 217). It is more a listener’s responsibility to empathize with the speaker’s feelings, wishes, needs, and thinking so that the speaker is not placed in the awkward position of being more direct (Clancy, 1986; Mizuta et al., 1996; Tobin, 1995; Toda et al., 1990).

In contrast, in communities where individualistic values (e.g., autonomy, exploration, and self-assertiveness) are prioritized, such as in the United States, caregiver-child communication is more verbal, clear, and direct, with a focus on the responsibility of the speaker (Mizuta et al., 1996; Tobin, 1995; Toda et al., 1990). It “expresses itself in such common injunctions as ‘Say what you mean,’ ‘Don’t beat around the bush,’ and ‘Get to the point’” (Levine, 1985, p. 28). In these communities, the responsibility of listeners to be sensitive is less and the responsibility of speakers to “get their ideas across” is greater (Clancy, 1986; Reddy, 1979; Tobin, 1995).

Cultural differences in sensitivity also have been observed in adult-adult interactions. In collectivistic communities (e.g., Japan, China, and Korea) where members’ goal is to maintain harmony in the in-group, adults need to be “cautious and indirect” so as not to offend others (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1994, p. 39). Speakers expect a listener to know what is bothering them so that they do not have to be specific. “Ishinden-shin” (taciturnity), a major characteristic of Japanese communication, requires that the speaker be sensitive to very indirect and subtle cues. “When carried to an extreme, ishin-denshin involves communication without talking, mental telepathy” (p. 51). By contrast, in individualistic communities, where “a person’s goal is to assert him- or herself as a unique person (individualism), he or she must be direct so that others will know where he or she stands” (p. 39).

The findings above point to an array of Japanese-U.S. differences in sensitivity, including: 1) greater sensitivity to needs for indulgence/interdependence in Japan, and to needs for autonomy/independence in the United States; 2) greater responsibility of the listener in Japan, as seen in parents’ empathy and reliance on situational cues, and greater responsibility of the speaker in the United States, as seen in parents’ encouragement of self-expression; 3) more guessing of the intentions of others and reliance on indirect and nonverbal signals in Japan, as contrasted with less guessing of intentions and more direct and verbal signals in the United States.

We suggest that the anticipation-responsiveness distinction underlies the differences in sensitivity described above. There is evidence that the two types of sensitivity have different consequences. Rothbaum, Kakinuma, and Azuma (2004) found that mothers in both the United States and Japan claim that anticipating needs (i.e., meeting the child’s needs before the child makes a request) is more likely to foster accommodative behaviors (i.e., empathy, propriety, compliance), and that responsiveness (i.e., waiting until the child expresses his/her needs before responding) is more likely to foster individualistic behaviors (i.e., exploration, autonomy, self-assertion). Given Japanese mothers’ preference for accommodative behaviors and U.S. mothers’ preference for individualistic behaviors (Rothbaum, Pott, et al., 2000), these findings suggest that caregivers will differ in their reliance on anticipation versus responsiveness. However, there is no direct evidence of cultural differences in caregivers’ (parents’ or teachers’) preference for the two types of sensitivity. All of the evidence reviewed above is anecdotal or focuses on variables related to anticipation and responsiveness. However, there is no direct evidence of cultural differences in caregivers’ (parents’ or teachers’) preference for the two types of sensitivity. All of the evidence reviewed above is anecdotal or focuses on variables related to anticipation and responsiveness (e.g., parental control, empathy, and encouragement of children’s self-expression), rather than on anticipation and responsiveness per se.

**The Current Study**

The goal of the current study is to provide direct evidence of U.S. and Japanese teachers’ beliefs about anticipation and responsiveness. We expect that Japanese teachers, as compared to U.S. teachers, are more likely to emphasize anticipation of children’s needs
and teachers' responsibility for observing the situation and picking up indirect, subtle and nonverbal cues. By contrast, we expect that U.S. teachers, as compared to Japanese teachers, would be more likely to emphasize responsiveness to children's needs and children's responsibility for expressing their needs directly, explicitly, and verbally. While all teachers are concerned with effective communication and classroom cooperation, we believe that they perceive different pathways to these outcomes. Japanese teachers emphasize anticipation, because they are relatively more focused on teacher-child interdependence, harmony, and self-restraint. Teachers in the United States emphasize responsiveness, because they are relatively more focused on the child's independence, autonomy, and self-expression.

To study differences between U.S. and Japanese teachers' sensitivity, we interviewed teachers and informally observed classrooms. Teachers were asked forced-choice questions, which required selection of an answer favoring anticipation or responsiveness, and they were asked to explain each selection. The observations, which began prior to the interviews and continued after they were completed, informed the selection of the interview questions and were of substantial value when interpreting the interview findings (Tobin, 1995). We assume that teachers are formally trained and educated in ways that reflect the dominant values of their culture, and thus are very conscious of social values and goals, and of the methods necessary to achieve them.

We tested two closely related hypotheses: 1) Japanese teachers place more emphasis than U.S. teachers on the importance of anticipating children's needs, whereas U.S. teachers place more emphasis than Japanese teachers on the importance of sensitively responding to children's needs, and 2) Japanese teachers believe that children expect to wait for a teacher to ask them if they need help and children expect their teacher to know when they are having difficulty, whereas U.S. teachers believe that children express their needs explicitly and children expect their caregivers to promptly respond to them.

Method

Participants
The sample consisted of 20 preschool educators from urban communities in the United States and Japan (JP). There were 9 U.S. teachers (7 female and 2 male) from the Boston area and 11 Japanese teachers (all female) from the Ibaraki area. Prior to recruiting participants, each school's principal or director was contacted. With permission from the principal/director, teachers and parents were contacted to obtain further permission to observe the classrooms.

The U.S. sample consisted of two preschool sites, in Medford (n = 3 teachers) and Somerville (n = 6 teachers), Massachusetts, and the JP sample consisted of three preschool sites, in Mito-city (n = 1 teachers), Johoku-town (n = 4 teachers), and Gozenyama-town (n = 6 teachers). The U.S. settings, which were university affiliated, served families that were diverse with regard to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and children's functioning. The U.S. and Japanese samples were similar with respect to socioeconomic status of teachers and families (for both, the average was middle to upper middle class), average age of teachers (M = 30) and children (M = 4), and average number of years of teaching experience (M = 7). There were, however, differences in the teachers' educational backgrounds: while most of the U.S. teachers held at least a four-year undergraduate degree in early childhood education or a related field (there were 2 M.A.s and 1 Ph.D.), the majority of Japanese teachers held an associate degree in early childhood education. In addition, no male teachers were interviewed in Japan, but two were interviewed in the United States.

Procedure
The procedure described below was employed in both the United States and Japan.

Interview With Teachers. Data was collected through individual interviews with each teacher. The interviews were conducted
on-site by the second author during classroom free time in both countries. Only the 12 questions concerned with sensitivity versus responsiveness that were successfully translated are considered in this article (three questions were not successfully translated, and seven other questions focused on teachers’ expectations regarding children’s effort). Each question employed a forced-choice format involving two options, and was preceded by a scenario describing commonly occurring classroom circumstances. The interview, constructed by U.S. and Japanese investigators, was originally written in English and was translated into Japanese by an individual fluent in both languages. The translation was reviewed by a second individual who was also fluent in both languages, and changes were made to increase the similarity in meaning of the two versions.

Back-translation, by a third bilingual individual, was conducted to confirm the similarity of the Japanese and English interviews. Subsequently, a group of four U.S. undergraduate students compared the original English version to the back-translated English version. For most questions (n=12), no differences or only trivial differences were noted. In cases where the two versions were rated as more than trivially different from one another by two or more of the observers, the questions were dropped (n=3).

The interview questions were based on descriptions of anticipation and responsiveness included in the articles on Japanese and U.S. caregiving reviewed in the introduction. The situations addressed in these questions were based on the second author’s observations of preschools in both cultures. Feedback about an initial set of questions was sought from two researchers familiar with Japanese-U.S. differences, and revisions were made to better capture their understanding of the anticipation-responsiveness distinction. Finally, the questions were shown to two teachers in each country to ensure that the questions were meaningful to the teachers, and that teachers would base their choices on the anticipation-responsiveness distinction rather than on other differences embedded in the two forced-choice options. Minor changes were made, based on the pilot teachers’ feedback.

Following each forced-choice question, the interviewer asked participants to explain the reason(s) for their choice (“Could you tell me why you selected that answer?”). Probes were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses. A qualitative analysis of teachers’ explanations was conducted to identify recurring themes, using methods borrowed from Miles and Huberman (1994). Examples of the reasons are included in the Discussion section. Largely because of the requests for, and probing of, reasons, the interviews took an average of approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants. They were audiotaped and transcribed.

Classroom Observations
Observations occurred in two classrooms in Japan and in three classrooms in the United States. The two Japanese classrooms were observed for about 24 hours each. Two of the U.S. classrooms were observed for about 10 hours and the third for about 96 hours. Field notes were taken in each classroom. Due to the difficulty of gaining consent for videotaping from parents in the United States, videotaping was conducted only in the Japanese classrooms.

Results
Fisher’s Exact Tests were used to determine the significance of the 2 (culture) x 2 (response option) chi square for each forced-choice question. Significant differences between U.S. and Japanese teachers were found for 7 of the 12 questions (see Appendix A). These seven questions are divided into two groups, corresponding to whether they involve the role of teacher (teachers’ perception of their role as a teacher) or the role of the child (teachers’ perception of the child’s role). The results for each group are summarized below. Only significant results are reported here (see Appendix B for the five questions yielding non-significant results).
Role of Teacher
In question 4, teachers were asked whether it is important for a teacher to observe a child carefully so that the teacher knows when to offer help rather than to wait until the child requests it. All 11 Japanese teachers responded “yes,” but only 5 of the 9 U.S. teachers responded “yes,” (p < .05).

In question 5, teachers were asked whether it is more important for a teacher to a) consistently respond to a child’s positive requests by granting his/her request, or b) observe a child carefully so that the teacher knows when to offer help rather than to wait until the child requests it. All 11 Japanese teachers, but only 4 of the 9 U.S. teachers selected (b), (p < .001).

In Question 9, teachers were asked what they would do in a situation in which a child fell down while he/she was playing outside. The options were: a) Would you come and comfort this child? or b) Would you wait and see what happens and if the child starts crying, would you come and comfort this child? All 11 JP teachers but only 3 out of the 9 U.S. teachers selected (a), (p < .001).

In Question 10, teachers were asked what they would do in a situation in which a child is in a bad mood. Their options were: a) to go to this child and offer comfort (e.g., sitting close to her and talking to her) or b) to let this child know that she can approach you if she feels she needs comfort. All 11 Japanese teachers but only 2 of the 9 U.S. teachers selected (a), (p < .001).

In Question 12, teachers were asked how important it is to respond or anticipate in everyday situations (when there is no danger involved). All 11 JP teachers answered “anticipating” is more important than responding, whereas only 4 of the 9 U.S. teachers gave this answer, (p < .001).

Role of Child
In Question 7, teachers were asked to imagine a situation in which there are 15 to 20 children with one teacher in a classroom. In such a situation, would they think that: a) children are more likely to expect their teacher to come over and help when they need help, or b) children do not expect their teacher to know if they are having difficulty, but they are more likely to expect their teacher to respond to their requests when they express their needs. Most of the Japanese teachers (10/11) but none of the U.S. teachers selected (a), (p < .001).

In Question 11, teachers were asked whether a child who has the desirable characteristics just described would be: a) more likely to ask for their help when he/she feels he/she needs it, or b) more likely to wait for a teacher to ask him/her if he/she may needs help. Most of the Japanese teachers (7/11) but only two of the U.S. teachers (2/9) selected (b), (p < .05).

Individual Teachers’ Forced-Choice Responses
While Japanese teachers almost always selected the anticipation option, the U.S. teachers were divided in their selection of anticipation and responsiveness. To further explore this difference, we computed individual anticipation scores. For each teacher, the number of anticipation selections was divided by the total number of selections (for the seven questions yielding significant results). The U.S. scores, which ranged from .14 to .57, were lower than the lowest Japanese scores, which ranged from .71 to 1.00. All U.S. teachers favor anticipation in some contexts, but none of them favor it as consistently as Japanese teachers.

Teachers’ Explanations of Their Responses
For the qualitative analysis of teachers’ explanations, the three authors and two students from each culture re-read the interview responses several times so as to identify recurring themes. Only those themes for which at least four U.S. and four Japanese teachers made relevant comments were selected. Three themes, described in the next section, met these criteria.

Discussion
The findings indicate cultural differences in preschool teachers’ sensitivity. In Japan,
teachers emphasize anticipation of children's needs, and they see the primary role of the child as waiting for the teacher to meet their needs. In the United States, teachers emphasize responsiveness to children's explicit expression of needs, and they see the primary role of children as clearly expressing their needs. The teachers' forced-choice responses and explanations, and the second author's classroom observations, point to cultural differences involving three themes: 1) the goal of sensitivity; 2) the responsibility for sensitivity (i.e., for clarifying the child's needs); and 3) the pathway to sensitivity. Below, we consider cultural differences pertaining to each theme.

The Goal of Sensitivity: Learning To Depend on the Caregiver or the Self

For Japanese teachers, the goal of sensitivity is to foster children's expectation that teachers will closely attend to and understand their needs. The expectation of teacher benevolence, which takes years to develop, is the foundation of the teacher-child interdependent relationship. Children gain a sense of assurance from knowing that the teacher is constantly looking after them. A fundamental aspect of the children's role in this relationship is to depend on the teacher—specifically, on the teacher's ability to anticipate needs.

Q7/JP4: “As children, being looked after is something that makes them happy. They expect that under any circumstance they wish the teacher will always notice them.”
Q7/JP7: “I think I would be a little lonely [if I was a child who did not expect my teacher to look after me]. In the day care, the children probably feel the teacher is their mother, so they would want to have a closer relationship. Like feeling secure. . . .”
Q9/JP10: “Rather than not comforting the child (or) leaving the child alone . . . letting the child know that he was being looked after would make them (sic) feel relieved/assurance (anshin) . . . like there was someone looking after me.”

Whereas Japanese teachers' goal is to foster interdependence, U.S. teachers foster a balance between independence and reliance on the caregiver as needed. U.S. teachers want children to cultivate their skills of self-expression and self-assertion. They believe that when children take responsibility for requesting help, and when teachers respond promptly to their requests, children become more independent.

Q7/US1: “I think that in such an extreme situation [many children per teacher], children become more independent . . . and become more verbal and expressive about something they need.”
Q7/US8: “[W]hen children are in a large group . . . they know that, usually, they have to ask for help and if they come get the teacher, they are going to get the help they want.”
Q7/US2: “[When there are] many children with not that many teachers, the teacher is not going to know [what the child needs] . . . so kids are going to learn that they have to come and ask for help . . . or over time, they could be sitting in the corner. . . .”

Differences in goals are also suggested by borderline significant cultural differences in the qualities a teacher should promote when a child requests help (Q8). U.S. teachers tend to be more invested in promoting children's confidence and self-esteem; Japanese teachers tend to be more invested in reassuring a child that the teacher will help if needed, and in helping the child learn the importance of reading cues.

Responsibility for Sensitivity: The Teacher's or Child's Role in Clarifying Needs

Japanese teachers believe that they have primary responsibility for clarifying children's needs, in part because of the child's inability to do so. They emphasize children's immaturity and inability to express themselves, and their own obligation to make decisions.

Q5/JP3: “Adults are supposed to say what
they want to say . . . but children are not. They have a different way of thinking. It can be too late if you wait until the child approaches the teachers. I think it is important for a teacher to know each child's condition and situation every day."

Q9/JP9: “Even if I saw that the child looked OK, I would still need to come close to the child to check his/her condition. I should know why it happened to the child even if the child is not crying and even if it was a small incident.”

Q10/JP8: “It would be difficult for the child to get the teacher on their own, so the teacher must have a sense of why the child is in a bad mood.”

Q12/JP3: “Children cannot express themselves well with words.”

U.S. teachers believe that children have primary responsibility for clarifying their own needs, in part because children have the requisite verbal skills and self-understanding. U.S. teachers view the children as the experts about their own needs. While the teacher is the ultimate authority, she should reinforce children’s belief that they are able to make decisions about how to meet their needs. The teacher must function as a partner as well as an authority.

Q9/US4: “I want them to advocate for themselves.”

Q10/US6: “[W]e have many children here come and ask for help in their own way, and they get the help they need . . . if they really need help, they are going to ask for it.”

Q10/US4: “I think you should acknowledge . . . ‘You don’t want to talk to your friends right now . . . but if you need my help, you can come and find me.’ . . . That empowers the child to make sense of his or her own emotions and to seek help if needed.”

Q7/US3: “[When there are 15-20 children with one teacher], they cannot expect to be responded to quickly . . . and the teacher cannot expect herself . . . to be able to notice things before they happen. . . . [O]f course, I think you still could try . . . watch children as closely as you possibly can . . . and offer assistance or let them know that you are there to help . . . but I think that that role has to be more on children . . . to ask for help. . . .”

U.S. teachers claim that children assume more responsibility for communicating signals clearly when the teacher-child ratio is low. Ironically, teachers in Japan expect children to assume less responsibility for communicating signals clearly than do teachers in the United States, even though there is a much lower teacher-child ratio in Japan than in the United States (Lewis, 1995).

Pathways to Sensitivity: Making Assumptions or Responding to Explicit Cues

Japanese teachers make informed assumptions about children’s needs. U.S. teachers are reluctant to make assumptions about children’s needs because they believe doing so undermines autonomy. Underlying Japanese teachers’ assumptions is empathy, careful observations, and reliance on indirect, subtle, and nonverbal cues. Underlying U.S. teachers’ reluctance to make assumptions is faith in children’s self-expression and reliance on prompt responses to children’s direct, explicit, and verbal cues.

Japanese teachers observe the child very closely and go to great lengths to familiarize themselves with each child. They expect themselves to know about the child’s home circumstances, life events, personality, and ongoing classroom behavior. Teachers visit the child’s home and regularly exchange information with parents, using a small notebook (called renraku-cho) in which they describe daily behavior at home and school. Careful observation of the child, as well as circumstances surrounding the child (e.g., how they get along with other children), is needed to understand the child’s behavior and mood. In the classroom, teachers regularly exchange information about each child. Even such details as the child’s food preferences are considered important and are shared with other teachers. Armed with this information,
teachers believe that they can read children’s minds and make informed assumptions about what children need:

Q4/JP3: “It is very important for a teacher to anticipate that a particular child will ask for help. At least the teacher should know the condition of the child in the particular morning on a particular day. It is important to observe the child at all times.”

Q5/JP2: “From my knowledge about each child’s personality and his/her home living environment, [for example] what and how they eat at home, whether they can change clothes themselves, how his/her everyday life is at home. . . . I would judge how much and at what point I would offer my assistance. . . . The goal is to understand not just how the child behaves, but why the child behaves as s/he does.”

Q4/JP9: “If the teacher doesn’t have a grasp of the children’s situation at all times, I think she wouldn’t know why the child came to her to request or ask for something.”

Empathy with the child’s emotions is the cornerstone of the Japanese teacher’s sensitivity. The teacher must be ever watchful of the child, relying on the child’s indirect cues. Direct cues, especially the child’s explicit expression of need, may undermine the effort to achieve emotional unity, because words underscore teacher-child separation as opposed to a sense of unity. Efforts to assure the child of the teacher’s care and attention are especially evident in the situations where the child is in a bad mood or has fallen.

Q10/JP11: “If a child is in a bad mood, I think the child is in a state that he/she wouldn’t want to say that he/she is in a bad mood . . . so I would come to the child and sit next to him/her. I would not [directly] ask, ‘You’re not your usual self. Did something happen? Did something bad happen?’ but I would say things like, ‘Something is different today’ . . . and watch the reaction.”

By contrast, U.S. teachers emphasize the dangers inherent in making assumptions. Their goals—encouraging the child’s autonomy, initiative, and self-expression, by waiting for the child’s request—are incompatible with assuming what the child needs. In contrast to Japanese teachers’ belief that sensitivity entails mind reading, U.S. teachers subscribe to the aphorism “to assume makes an ‘ass’ of you (‘u’) and ‘me.’” U.S. teachers’ directive to “use your words” reflects their belief that teachers cannot and should not be mind readers:

Q12/US3: “I think it is more important to respond than to anticipate . . . because I think that . . . your routine kind of situations in which children would want [my] help are part of them learning how to recognize problems . . . solve problems . . . and ask for assistance. . . . [If] you anticipate all of those and step into before they happen . . . children are missing opportunities to gain those skills. . . . [A]nticipating things could cause a mess . . . helping children figure them out is a more appropriate role for a teacher.”

Q12/US2: “I think responding is more important . . . because . . . I think that it’s [reinforcing the] value of kids’ asking . . . and learning how to navigate in his culture. . . . [W]aiting for somebody [the teacher] to do something is a problem. It would be lovely if the teachers are indulgent of them . . . [and] anticipate [children’s] needs and help them out . . . but they are going to have to more likely initiate . . . in order [for the teacher] to respond. . . . There is . . . a saying, ‘The squeaky wheel gets the oil.’”

While U.S. teachers provide comfort, the impulse to jump in and assist the child is balanced by a conviction that it is often best to step back and promote individuation. The tension between providing proximity and promoting separation exists even when the child is in a negative mood or has fallen down. While teachers should be responsive, the child must learn to initiate contact via direct, explicit, and verbal requests. Instead
of being proactive and providing proximal contact, teachers should wait and provide “distal contact” (Rothbaum, Weisz, et al., 2000), thereby expressing both care and respect for the child’s autonomy.

Q4/US7: “I don’t like jumping in and offering my assistance.”
Q9/US4: “I would wait and see what happens . . . and if the child starts crying, then I would go [to him] . . . I wouldn’t step into the child’s space if the child doesn’t demonstrate his needs.”
Q10/US5: “I would let her know that I am available to her when she wants . . . I would tell her, ‘I see you look upset. I am not sure why, but when you are ready, come and tell me’ . . . recognizing how she is feeling but leave and get her a place to come get to it.”

Qualifications
There is a danger of overstating the findings. While U.S. and Japanese teachers prefer different types of sensitivity—indeed, no U.S. teacher-endorsed anticipation on more than four of the 7 questions yielding significant effects, whereas all of the Japanese teachers endorsed anticipation on at least five of those questions—teachers in both cultures acknowledge the value of anticipating and responding to children’s needs. For many of the quotes provided above, a somewhat related quote, or near identical quote, from the other culture can be noted—but fewer of them. On several occasions, a teacher emphasized one type of sensitivity while mentioning the benefits of the other type:

Q12/US3: “I think it is more important to respond than to anticipate . . . [but] there are [a] couple of times that I think the most important thing is to anticipate . . . in situations which might cause danger or conflicts.”
Q12/JP9: “I think it is necessary to be able to infer from the situation, because this child cannot do this and that, so I should help but . . . sometimes I should encourage the child to do it for themselves.”

Q10/US6: “[W]e have many children [who] . . . ask for help in a traditional [verbal] way . . . [but] there is a boy who comes up to me and puts his coat on my lap. . . . [T]hat means he is telling me that he needs help to put his coat on.”

Some of the differences between cultures involved relatively subtle differences in meaning:

Q4/US3: “There are situations in which I would offer help before a child asks . . . I would say, ‘Let me know if you would like me to help with that,’ letting her know that I am available, but I would not say, ‘do you want help?’ or ‘it looks like you need help so let me help you.’ It’s the smallest difference but I think it’s very important.”

Moreover, there were several findings for which we did NOT obtain cultural differences (see Appendix B): Teachers in both cultures maintain that it is important for children to express their desires for assistance. Teachers in both cultures report that, after they offer help, it is important to wait for the child to indicate s/he needs help. Most teachers in both cultures believe it is better to carefully observe the child and offer help when the teacher believes help is needed than to always respond immediately to the child’s requests.

Some of these cultural similarities may not hold up to closer scrutiny. For example, Japanese teachers say they would wait for the child to accept their offer to help, but our observations of classrooms indicate that they typically do not. The two Japanese teachers who did not respond to the question about waiting both commented, “I know I should wait, but I know I wouldn’t.” Japanese teachers are aware of Westerners’ emphasis on giving the child space and waiting for the child, but their instinct is to jump in and help proactively.

Further highlighting the complex interplay of similarities and differences in sensitivity is the absence of cultural differences in teachers’ endorsement of responsiveness to
the child’s positive requests in Q3: Japanese teachers’ preference for responsiveness is somewhat (albeit non-significantly) greater than that of U.S. teachers. This finding contrasts with the finding that, when anticipation is pitted against responsiveness, Japanese are nearly unanimous in selecting the former and Americans more often select the latter. The finding of greater responsiveness by Japanese caregivers is consistent with the findings by Trommsdorff (1999) noted in the introduction. It appears that Japanese teachers are very invested in responsiveness, but they prefer to anticipate when given an opportunity to do so. Since anticipation preempts the child’s ability to make explicit requests, and therefore the caregiver’s ability to respond to those requests, Japanese caregivers would not score high on responsiveness when anticipation is an option. This would help explain conflicting findings regarding cultural differences in responsiveness.

Conclusion
Both Japanese and U.S. teachers justify their choices of anticipation and responsiveness in terms of their goals for children, their beliefs about their own and their child’s responsibility, and their assumption about the best pathway to sensitivity. While we emphasize cultural differences in each of these themes, there was also overlap between Japanese and U.S. teachers’ explanations of their choices. Relatively small differences in their beliefs about sensitivity combine to create pronounced differences in their ultimate selection of different forms of sensitivity (anticipation versus responsiveness).

We are particularly interested in whether there are deeper differences underlying those reported here. One such difference has to do with the kinds of signals caregivers are seeking to promote. Several investigators suggest that responsiveness reflects a focus on positive (e.g., prideful) signals and anticipation reflects a focus on negative (e.g., distressed) signals (Friedlmeier & Trommsdorff, 1999; Keller et al., 2002; LeVine, 2004; Rothbaum & Morelli, 2005). For example, LeVine found that Gusii mothers are much more sensitive to crying than U.S. mothers are, but are much less sensitive to positive signals; indeed, they turn away from infants who are getting positively excited so as to calm them. Caregivers who prioritize their children’s interdependence may focus on the prevention of negative signals, which requires that they anticipate their occurrence; by contrast, caregivers who prioritize their children’s individuation and autonomy may focus on the expression of positive signals, which requires that they wait for and promptly respond to such signals.

We are also interested in the possibility that anticipation and responsiveness are associated with cultural differences in conceptions of self (i.e., interdependence and independence) and corresponding differences in the nature of relatedness (Fiske, Kitayama, Marcus, & Nisbett, 1998). Despite widespread agreement that caregivers’ sensitivity contributes in important ways to self and relationships, surprisingly little research exists on how cultural differences in sensitivity relate to cultural differences in these key phenomena. Unpacking the rich construct of sensitivity is, we believe, a critical step in making these links.

Practical Implications
Cultural Differences in Standards for Preschool Teachers. Organizations that are responsible for setting standards for teacher behavior in the United States and Japan advocate differences in sensitivity that parallel the differences found in the present study. For example, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which sets guidelines for preschools in the United States, calls for teachers to be trained in sensitive responsiveness. As stated in NAEYC’s (2005) first Program Standard, titled “Relationships”:

Program Standard: The program promotes positive relationships among all children and adults to encourage each child’s sense of individual worth and belonging as part of a community and to foster each child’s ability to contribute as
a responsible community member.

Rationale: Positive relationships are essential for the development of personal responsibility, capacity for self-regulation, for constructive interactions with others, and for fostering academic functioning and mastery. Warm, sensitive, and responsive interactions help children develop a secure, positive sense of self and encourage them to respect and cooperate with others. . . . (italics added)

The NAEYC guidelines not only highlight the importance of responsive interactions, they also link responsiveness to the development of the child's individual worth and sense of self—outcomes that are less likely when adults anticipate children's needs than when they are responsive to children's needs.


The basic ideal of kindergarten education is to educate young children through their environment. . . the environment should be created with the intention of ensuring voluntary activities among children, based on an understanding and anticipation of the individual actions of each child. Teachers should therefore create a physical and psychological environment in view of the importance of the relationship between a child and other people, and things. (italics added)

Although for the past 10 years, the Japanese government has intentionally incorporated Western goals into the curriculum, including increased attention to the child's individuality (Holloway, 2000), evidence points to an abiding focus on structuring the environment, in a proactive manner, to meet children’s needs. Nowhere do the Japanese standards mention the importance of responding to verbal signals or explicit cues from the child. Rather, the emphasis is on careful observation: “appropriate support should be provided to children by watching over their actions” (Chapter 2: Human Relationships). Similarly, the Ministry calls for carefully constructed, child-centered instruction plans based on preexisting knowledge of children's (including the individual child's) needs, rather than on curricula designed to respond to explicit signals from the child.

Implications for Teacher Training. As part of their training, U.S. teachers should be informed about the cultural differences in sensitivity found in the present study and reflected in the above standards. By heightening teachers' awareness of diverse forms of sensitivity, we will increase their ability to be sensitive to the needs of children from different backgrounds.

When Japanese children enter U.S. preschools, they encounter unfamiliar forms of sensitivity. This can pose difficulties for the children, as well as their parents. As one Japanese parent commented to a U.S. teacher, “If you know my child, you should know what she needs before she tells you. If she has to tell you what she needs, it is too late. That shows you are distant and removed from her emotions.” Awareness of these differences in sensitivity is a first step in enabling U.S. teachers to effectively integrate Japanese children into their classrooms.

It is important that teachers view Japanese and U.S. forms of sensitivity as compatible rather than mutually exclusive. To the extent that teachers resist an initial impulse to view the “other” practices as alien, and instead view them as alternate forms of everyday practice, they can modify their practices in ways that make the Japanese child feel more comfortable. Our informal observations, as well as our interview findings, indicate that anticipation of children's needs does occur in U.S. classrooms. While anticipation appears to be far more prevalent and more valued in Japanese settings, a helpful starting point for U.S. teachers is appreciating the commonalities as well as the differences in the exercise of and rationale for anticipation of needs. Similarly, in
communicating with parents, it is helpful to emphasize the similarities as well as the differences in sensitivity. U.S. teachers’ recognition of the compatibility of cultural differences is likely to foster Japanese parents’, and ultimately their children’s, comfort with U.S. classrooms.

A particularly powerful way of integrating U.S. and Japanese forms of sensitivity is by acknowledging their appropriateness in different settings. While an emphasis on responsiveness to explicit signals is likely to be the prevailing norm in U.S. preschools, this does not necessarily conflict with reliance on anticipation as the prevailing norm in the Japanese home. Children are adept at learning that different rules apply in different settings, and the Japanese culture places great emphasis on children’s ability to behave differently in different contexts. Indeed, there is a Japanese word for this skill (kejime). When teachers convey understanding of and respect for Japanese parents’ expression of sensitivity, and when teachers openly discuss differences in sensitivity with parents, children are better able to adjust to the differences in the sensitivity that they experience in the home and at school.

References


Appendix A

Questions Yielding Significant Differences

Question 4: Would you think it is important for a teacher to observe a child carefully so that the teacher knows when to offer help or to wait until the child requests it?

Question 5: Which would you think is more important? (a) a teacher consistently responds to a child’s positive requests by granting his/her request. (b) a teacher observes a child carefully so that the teacher knows when to offer help rather than to wait until the child requests it.

Question 9: Children are playing in the outside. A child hurts him/herself, but not seriously. The child probably stumbled over a stone but he/she is not crying. (a) Would you come and comfort this child? (b) Would you wait and see what happens and if the child starts crying, would you come and comfort this child?

Question 10: If a child is in a bad mood, would you think: (a) it is better to go to this child and offer comfort by sitting close to him/her and talking to him/her or (b) it is better to let this child to know that he/she can approach you if he/she feels she needs comfort?

Question 12: In everyday situations, where there is no danger, how important do you think it is to be: (a) responding and (b) anticipating?

Question 7: In a situation in which there are 15 to 20 children with one teacher in a classroom, would you think that: (a) children are more likely to expect their teacher to know when they are having difficulty and expect their teacher to come over and help when they need help? (b) children do not expect their teacher to know if they are having difficulty, but they are more likely to expect their teacher to respond to their requests when they express their needs?

Question 11: Would you think a child who has “desirable” characteristics that you just described is: (a) more likely to ask for your help when he/she feels he/she needs it? (b) more likely to wait for a teacher to ask him/her if he/she may need help?

Appendix B

Questions Yielding Non-significant Differences

Question 1: I will describe two teachers. I would like you to tell me which teacher you think is best or more effective. Teacher (a) always responds to a child’s request immediately by offering her help when a child asks for her help. Teacher (b) always carefully observes children and when she feels that a child may need some help, she immediately offers help.


Question 2: Would you think it is important to encourage children in your classroom to express their desire for assistance on a task (e.g., “Can you help me?”) when they feel they need it?

Results: Eight U.S. teachers and 11 Japanese teachers chose “yes.” None of the U.S. teachers or Japanese teachers chose “no” (p = 1.00).

Question 3: Would you think it is important for a teacher to consistently respond to a child’s positive requests (e.g., if the child asks for help in a polite manner) by granting his/her request?

Results: Two U.S. teachers and seven Japanese teachers chose “yes,” four U.S. teachers and two Japanese teachers chose “no” (p = 0.11).

Question 6: In a classroom, a teacher observes a child who is trying to put on his shoes, but not successfully. So, the teacher comes to the child and asks him, “Do you need help?” Would you think: (a) it is important for a teacher to wait until the child responds or (b) it is OK for a teacher to offer the help, even before the child has a chance to respond?

Results: Seven U.S. teachers and nine Japanese teachers chose (a). None of the U.S. teachers or Japanese teachers chose (b) (p = 1.00).

Question 8: A child is working on a puzzle, but unsuccessfully. I would like you to think what a “good/well-trained teacher” would do in the situation. I will describe two teachers, and I would like you to tell me which teacher you think is best (or more effective). As soon as the child asks for help, Teacher (a) would probably respond to the child’s request and help or assist him in an appropriate manner to support his self-confidence or self-esteem resulting from positive outcome. Teacher (b) would stay away, but would keep watching, and see what happens—if she feels the child needs help, she will come to the child and help or assist him, demonstrating to the child the importance of reading the cues of others.