

*Pablo Ramos/Yuliet Cruz/Eileén Sanabria*

# Cuban Children's Perception of the Japan Disasters

## Context

The Republic of Cuba is an archipelago with a total area of 109,886 sq km. Of them 107,466 sq km belong to the island of Cuba, 2,419 sq km to the Isle of Youth (considered as special municipality) and the rest is in the nearby keys.

The Cuban archipelago is separated by the sea on the north from the United States of America and the Bahamas Community; on the east from Haiti; on the south from Jamaica; and from Mexico on the west.

Cuba's population in 2010 was estimated at 11,235,863.

Cuba has two daily national newspapers and each province issues a weekly publication. There are five channels of open TV with national coverage and one channel for each of the provinces and the special municipality. Both newspapers and TV channels are owned by the state.

The children interviewed on the events in Japan in March 2011 are residents at Havana province (also Capital of the Republic) located to the north of western Cuba. The natural phenomena that most affect the province are hurricanes that, although they almost never hit the city directly, have consequently caused great sea flooding in the northern shore. Sea floods are also frequent, though with less magnitude, with the arrival of cold fronts during the warm tropical winters. Earthquakes and tremors are not common in the western region of the island.

## The sample

For the purpose of this study, 29 children residents in the Havana province were interviewed, divided in two subgroups, one of 19 children of Plaza de la Revolución municipality (big city), while the other is made of 10 children from Santa Fe (small town) in Playa municipality. The interviews were performed during March 19 to 21, 2001.<sup>1</sup>

The ages of the interviewed children are between 9 and 13, although the largest number is between ages 10 to 12. There is a balance regarding gender. More than half of the sample's children are studying the last grades of primary school.

It's interesting that there is a large proportion of mothers with university level, but a smaller proportion of university fathers, which can show the tendency that the male figure is the provider of the family thus starting his work life at an earlier age than women and later not continuing in higher studies.

## Relevant results

As the children in all the countries participating in this international study, Cuban children knew something had occurred in Japan. The most frequently mentioned phenomena were the tsunami and the earthquake, although the third part of the sample mentions the damages of the nuclear power plant, but only a few of the interviewed were clear in the order of the three events that happened in Japan.

The great majority of the children saw information on the subject on TV. As there are no special channels for children in Cuba, they obtained the information through news shows for adults. It is relevant that the most cited show was the ANSOC (National Association of Deaf of Cuba) news show broadcast before the start of children's shows in one of the national channels.

But, what do they know about the Japan disasters?

One should notice that many children made a reference to statistical numbers and data:

**Brayan, 11:** "The program said that more than 13,000 people are reported missing and 9,080 died and the nuclear plant exploded."

Maybe because the northern shore of Havana had suffered several sea floods, we found answers emotionally tinged, which is expressed in the following commentaries:

**David, 11:** "In all those TV programs what they showed were the dangers brought by the earthquake, the damage to the economy, the large number of missing and dead people, damage. All the images are horrible and sad."

The family has been in almost all cases a key element of socialization and information on what happened. As part of the conversations in the family, a key point was the solidarity received by Japan. As Cuba has given solidarity helps to several countries,

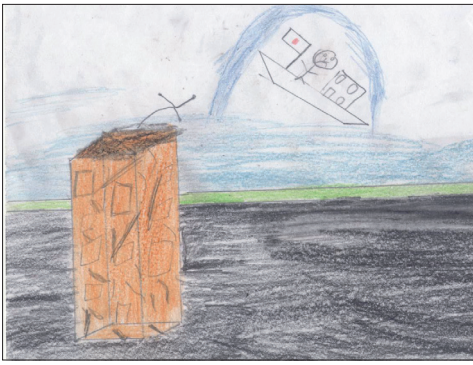


Figure 1: Drawing by Frank, 9



Figure 2: Drawing by Elizabeth, 10

many children extrapolate this to the case of Japan:

**Amanda, 12:** “I have been talking about hard living conditions and Cuba’s help.”

Most of the children have a great concern for the present situation regarding the suffering and anguish of the Japanese people.

School is another of the main socialization spaces for children. Girls are the ones who mostly stated their peers as the group with which they exchanged on the issue.

In one of those cases the teacher oriented to look for more information in the written press:

**Jorge, 11:** “Yes, in the political conversation section at school, the teacher asked us to take a newspaper story and talk about it.”

Among the main recurrent topics appearing in the drawings on what happened in Japan references to trees (as Jorge, 11, who drew coconut palms), boats and fishes (Briana, 11: “... the sea is sweeping cars, buildings and boats away and a lot of fishes are carried into the city by the force of the sea.”) are found, an issue we explain from the condition of island Cuba and its significant vegetation, and, on the other hand, because the places they live in are coastal ones, where some people go fishing not only as a job but as a hobby.

Similar as in other countries, the

images of nuclear power plants were drawings with a negative connotation. The emotional states mostly represented in the human figures of the drawings are crying, sadness and screams for help.

As curious icons standing out in three drawings we found the flag of Japan as close reference of that country (see figure 1).

**Frank, 9:** “I drew a building collapsing, the streets with cracks, huge waves sinking Japanese ships.”

Asked to draw on a sheet representing a TV screen how the perfect show should explain to children what happened in Japan, most of the drawings have imaginary shows, all of them news-like.

Many have names invented by the children that emphasize the need of information on international events. For example: “Know the world”, “Find out”, “Global”, “Looking around the world”, “From the world to children”. There are some attached desired characteristics for the programs such as the schedule. There are proposals of 6 pm, Sundays at 10 am and one child proposed 8 pm. As you can see, those are the right schedules for a children’s audience, except in the last case where, by the way, it says it is a children-youth news show. Another of the peculiarities specified is the language these shows must have (Alejandro, 10: “I drew two people talking in a normal and understandable language for children, about Japan.”) as well as the role of boys

and girls as presenters, (Elizabeth, 10: “I drew kids talking about what happened in Japan”, see figure 2).

Most of the children said they were still thinking of the issue and made direct statements on the issue. The largest majority considers that what happened is or could be harmful for them and their country, too:

**Jorge, 11:** “... because if something like that happened here in Cuba, this country would disappear.”

**Flavia, 13:** “... because if it happened to us, because we are not so developed so it would affect us more, because we are an underdeveloped country and it would take us a long time to recover.”

In general, the role of media in the vision of the world by children and how the symbolic references associated to Japan are related to the content the media broadcasts is quite evident. Further more they point out the need of creating news programs specially designed for children audiences.

## NOTE

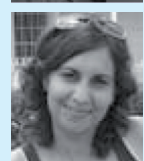
<sup>1</sup> The researchers from UNIAL network Ivonne Sánchez, Yaima Junco, Yaima Sánchez, Michel García and Carlos León also collaborated with this study.

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