

Michaela Levi/Maya Götz

“Was it a Monster Coming Through the Water?”

222 children from 8 countries wrote picture letters to television executives, showing how they imagined the events in Japan and what they would like to have seen on television regarding these events.

In trying to answer the question of how children perceived the natural and technological disasters in Japan we used quite different approaches – one method was “Picture Letters to Television Executives”. This involved asking children to draw on a pre-prepared page how they imagined the events in Japan and what they would like to see on television regarding these events. They explained their aesthetic articulations in a few sentences, which were noted down by academics or pedagogues on the spot and translated into English. In 2008, as part of an international study, this method had already proved itself as a possibility of gaining at least a rudimentary insight into children’s perspectives.¹ After the Japan disaster in March 2011 we were able, with this method, to include further countries in the study in addition to the investigations thus far. 222 children

aged 6-13 years from Slovenia, Israel, Korea, Hong Kong, the USA, the Dominican Republic, Colombia and Argentina articulated their ideas and wishes in the first 4 weeks after the disaster (March 14 until April 8 2011).

The inner image of the events

As investigations in other countries and through further methods have shown, the children’s picture letters show that the children have relatively similar perceptions of the events in Japan. The tsunami wave or the flood were the most common pictures, often with people shouting for help. These pictures probably came from concrete media images rather than from the

children’s imaginations. The children also drew nuclear power plants, the earthquake, fire, people being saved, as well as people trying to get away or people in helpless situations.

Some children symbolised the power of natural disaster by representing the wave as an animal. 9-year-old Marcella from Colombia, for instance, drew the wave as a monster (see Figure 1).

Noticeable differences in emphasis between countries

Besides the many things the drawings about the Japan disaster have in common, it is, however, possible to see distinctive features in individual countries. In the *Dominican Republic*, for instance, 51 out of 66 children drew the tsunami or the flood. Drawings of houses, trees, animals and people swept up in the flood were particularly frequent. In some cases the children indicated additionally on their drawings which buildings were involved: hospitals, schools and supermarkets. These are places the children consider necessary, important for their culture, indispensable and indestructible. In no other country did children focus so conspicuously on the destructive power of wa-

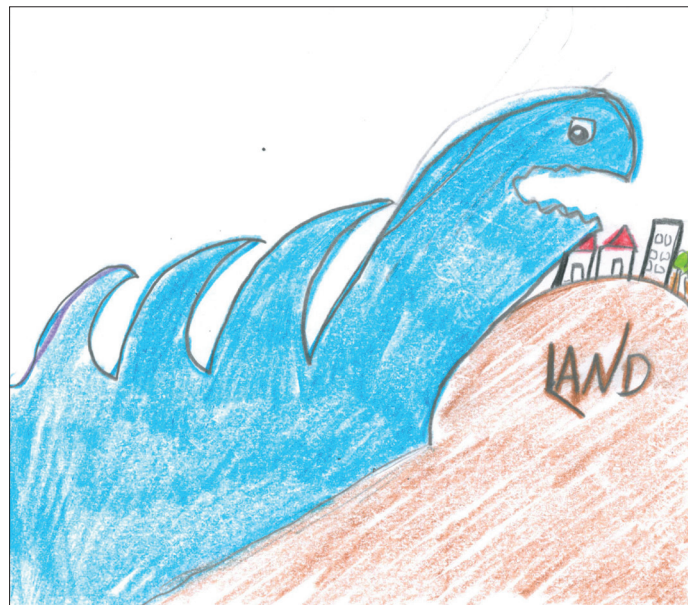


Figure 1: For Marcella (9 years, Colombia) the tsunami is a huge monster

ter. This is understandable, given that the Dominican Republic is an island. Interestingly, none of the children focused on the topic “earthquake”, which is striking considering that the Dominican Republic is right next to Haiti, which was devastated just over a year ago by a severe earthquake and a subsequent humanitarian disaster. Being close to the events and knowing about the dangers therefore do not automatically lead to greater awareness. The colleague responsible for the survey suspects one of the reasons behind this is the lack of children’s news making clear that the tsunami was caused by the earthquake. Other reasons could be the rather critical discourse concerning Haiti and the refugees from the earthquake, as well as the perceptible cultural divide between the everyday lives of those in the Dominican Republic and those on the other part of the island.

The picture letters from *Hong Kong*, which is approximately 2,800 km from the events, are characterized by significantly more emotion. This is in part due to age, but qualitative particularities are also involved. The children draw pictures of humans and human suffering much more frequently and with more intensity. The events (tsunami, earthquake, nuclear power plant) are represented in detail, but the central focus is people, their

suffering and the possibility of them being rescued (see. Figure 2). In addition, the children drew appeals for help which we found were nowhere else as concrete. According to Kara Chan, the academic responsible for the local data, possible reasons behind this could be the media discourses supportive of Japan, but above all the emotional proximity to Japan. Japanese culture and media, e.g. mangas and animes, are very well known in Hong Kong, and Japan is a popular holiday destination.

The children surveyed in *South Korea* live just under 1,000 km from the disaster region. They are 7 to 8 years younger than, for instance, the children from Hong Kong, and they focus more on the events (earthquake, fire) in their drawings. Some children speak of relatives in Japan they are very worried about. 7-year-old Sang-Hyun, for example, saw the big wave on television and is now afraid that the car belonging to his aunt, who lives in Japan, was swept away. 7-year-old Sonyun tells of how she saw cars and people on television being washed away. This made her frightened. How far the children are themselves emotionally affected determines their perspectives and the themes they address.

The nuclear power plant accident: less significant

Quantifications in qualitative studies are always only informative in a limited sense. The samples in individual countries are small and can certainly not be regarded as representative for the country. However, already in the qualitative analysis the evidence cannot be ignored, and in a quantification it becomes even more apparent: while for many children in

Germany the nuclear power plant was the central event in the Japan disaster (it was the focal point in 21% of the pictures), it was considerably less important for children in other countries (it was the focal point in 8% of the pictures, see diagram). In some pictures, the topic “nuclear power plant” definitely appears, but qualitatively it is portrayed in less detail (nuclear fuel rods, reactor blocks, etc.) and there are few indications that it is a building built for this purpose.

How perceptions are affected by the events

People across the world saw similar, if not for the most part even the same, images of the natural and technological disasters in Japan. In spite of all the differences with respect to their everyday environments, languages and cultures, in response to the question “What happened in Japan?” children drew potentially similar things. At the same time, this small-scale qualitative study points to tendencies in terms of where the emphasis is placed. Possible reasons behind this are:

- how far the children are themselves emotionally affected (marginal phenomena in terms of the disaster);
- the children imagining they are potentially in danger themselves, e.g. of similar local or global situations;
- knowledge of and emotional proximity to the scene of the disaster;
- emotionally negatively charged discourses in the public sphere and in the children’s everyday environment.

There are still probably further significant moments that are not apparent in this survey. Media, and the discourses they perpetuate and influence, play an important role at every point. Reflexion and quality debate are equally important for all people, but especially for children. For them, the manner in which the events are reported becomes a constituent part of their image



Figure 1: Bao (12 years, Hong Kong) thinks about supporting measures for the suffering people in Japan

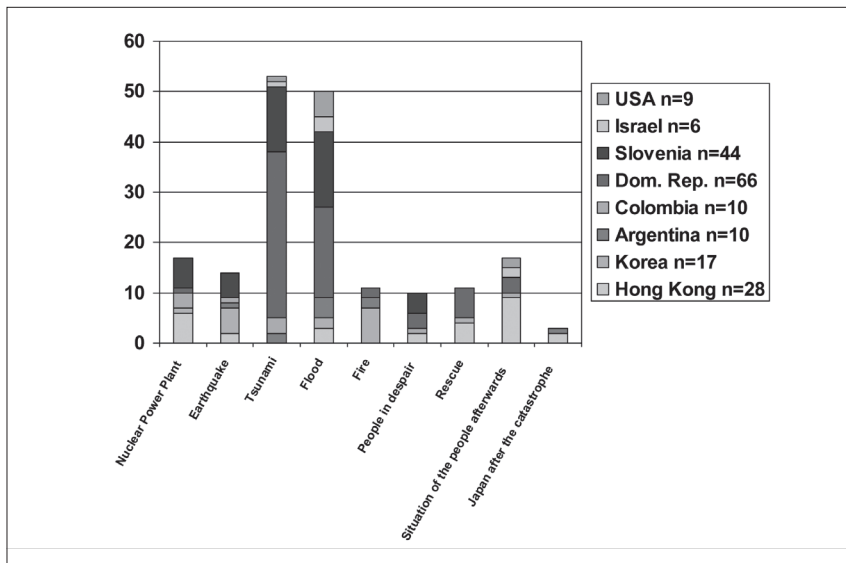


Diagram: Children from 8 countries wrote picture letters on the question "What happened in Japan?"

of Japan, the events and the question of how "one" deals with crises in other countries.

What do children across the world want to see in a programme for children?

We asked children to draw the kind of things they would like to see in quality children's television. 3 key areas emerged here:

a) Facts

Children growing up without children's television wanted explanations of the events that are easy to understand:

"Step by step (...) like a comic. And there should be lots of girls and boys in this comic." (Juanita, 12 years old, Colombia)

"It should be explained what has happened, and the foreign words that are always used should be explained, with funny examples and pictures." (Carmen, 10 years old, Colombia)

Some of the responses are typical of children's imaginations or involve humorous formulations. 10-year-old Fernando from Argentina, for example, wanted children's news to

explain the following: "How did the tsunami start? Was it a monster coming through the water?" That does not mean he wants a programme that "makes fun" of the facts, but rather a programme that can give a detailed answer that engages with a child's perspective or question.

b) Background information

Some children from Slovenia said they wanted, for instance, more background information on why the earth shook, what effects this had and whether there will be any changes in the future. To some extent, the children presented information here that they had already learnt from the media and that they wanted to learn more about. Tamar from Israel (11 years old) had, for instance, heard that "the evening had got shorter by a billionth of a second" because of the movement of the globe.

c) Stories of coping

Many children expressed, however, how they would also like personal stories and reports about personal experiences. They would like to see families being reunited, where they got their food from, how they had survived the earthquake and escaped the tsunami. Following that, according

to Alan from Argentina, they should report on what it feels like to be trapped inside a car. The emphasis here is clearly on stories of coping with the crisis. These stories assimilate the children's thoughts and fears and show in the reports how people cope with these problems and dangers. They want "something that gives you a good feeling" and "happiness" (Kia, 7 years old, Korea).

The children imagine that these facts, background information and stories of coping are communicated through a presenter. These could be animals like dogs or tortoises, but also cartoon characters like SpongeBob, who reports on the events together with Patrick.

NOTE

¹ In that project, in which around 1,000 children from 21 countries participated, the participants were asked to draw in picture letters to television executives what disturbed them about the way in which girls and boys were represented in children's television (c.f. Götz, Maya; Herche, Margit: *Children's Critical Views on the Image of Girls and Boys. In Götz, Maya (ed.): The Television Heroes and Heroines of Girls and Boys. Gender Specific Studies on Children's Television. Munich: Kopaed 2012 [Forthcoming]*).

THE AUTHORS

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