

## CHAPTER 6

### SIMON

*"One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes."*  
-Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1943)

play

becoming  
ourselves

learning

meaningfully  
powerfully

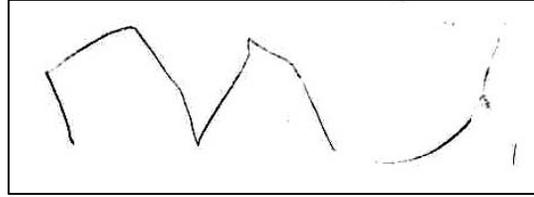
play

By the time Simon was born I had learned from the mistakes I had made with Emily and Tristan. This is not to say I didn't make new ones or occasionally repeat errors, but with Simon I was ready to learn - and I was fascinated by all he did. However, I continued to be hampered by my understanding of development as an issue of maturation and did not see him as a capable literacies user until just after he turned one year old. This is not to say that maturation does not occur; children clearly develop physically and this has some effect on what they are capable of doing as literacies producers; but they are using and understanding literacies almost from the time they are born. I first recognized Simon as a literacies user when he took a pencil and started to 'write'<sup>1</sup> in one of Emily's books while we were writing New Years letters and thank you cards together as a family. He clearly wanted to join the family and be part of our writing activity. We quickly stopped him from writing in the book and gave him a

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am assuming he is writing and not drawing because we were writing as a family

sheet of blank white paper to use instead (see figure 42). This has been the Simon's preferred way of making meaning and understanding the world



**Figure 42: Simon's first scribble**

ever since: through writing and drawing. He has used these literacies longer and more frequently than any other and they came to represent more than meaning but to reflect Simon's identity as well.

### Simon as a Writer

Simon loves to write and draw. On numerous occasions he has declared "I want to be a cartoonist." And on many of my research notes about his writing is the notation "he just can't get enough of this." He was exactly one year and one month old when I first observed him writing in the instance mentioned above. My research note reads:

Simon Jan. 02/00  
 At the beach house  
 Simon was up and 'walking' [he was creeping] around.  
 He found a pencil and started to 'write' in a book.  
 We took the book away and gave him a pad to write on instead.  
 He was moving the pencil back and forth holding it close to the eraser.  
 He was saying "da, da, da" repeatedly as he wrote.

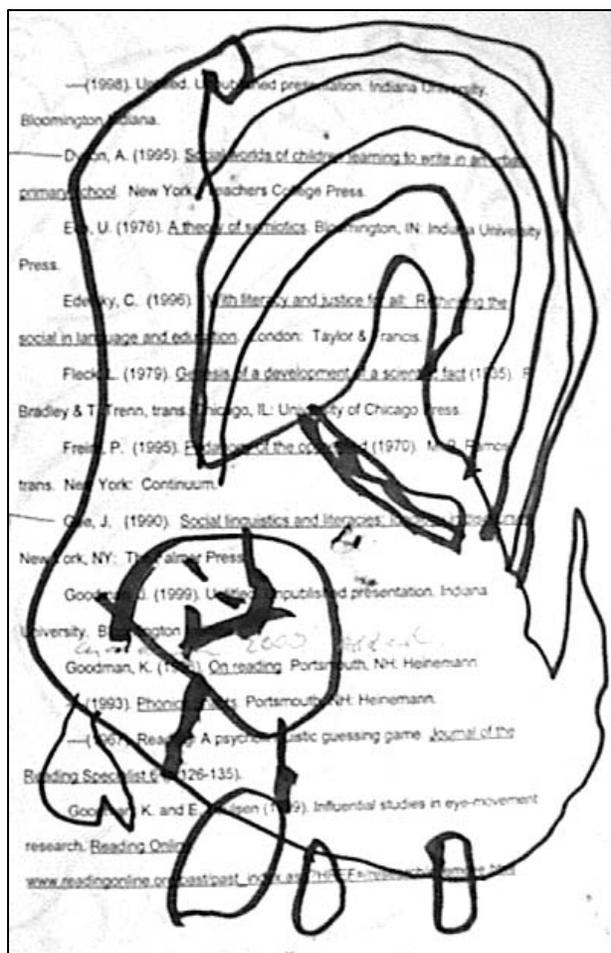
From that time on Simon loved to write/draw. He would write on every scrap of paper that he could find and his writing and drawing were constant. We made a point of keeping a ready supply of paper available so he never wrote/drew in a book again. It is difficult to say if Simon was drawing or writing at this point in his life, or if he would have made a

distinction between these two literacies, because he was not yet speaking in such defined terms. All of his writing/drawing was composed of scribbles. He would regularly talk at these times leading me to believe that he was using writing and drawing as a meaning making process (see figure 43).



**Figure 43: Simon writing (age 1 ½)**

When Simon was writing he did not seem to care if the page was blank or already had text printed on it (see figure 44). Christine and I would often give the children drafts of my work to write/draw on. Emily and Tristan only used the blank side of the paper but Simon wrote on both sides of the page, ignoring the existing printed text. Interestingly though, Simon respected the hand written work of others and never wrote over something that Emily or Tristan had made, which would often get



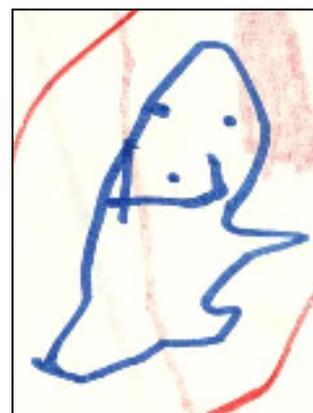
**Figure 44: Simon writing/drawing on the front of my drafts (age 4)**

mixed in with this paper. This behaviour suggests a possibility that Simon was already making a distinction between printed text, for reading, and writing, or not treating print as text.



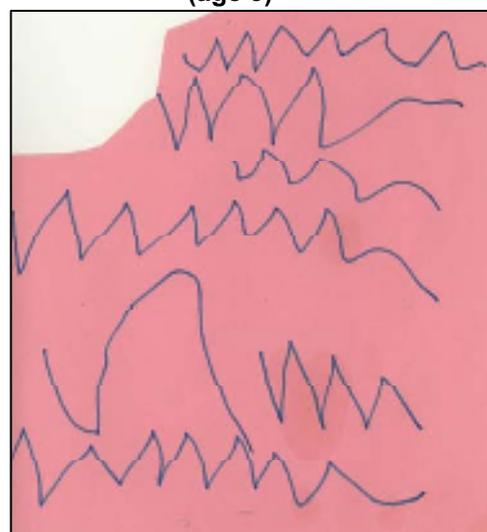
**Figure 45: Simon's blob writing/drawing (age 2)**

Later that same year, while he was two years old, Simon started to experiment specifically with drawing. After doing his regular drawing/writing he would go back and add faces to his work (see figure 45). This later developed into blob figures (see figure 46). It was at this point, just after he turned two, that Simon started to make a clear distinction



**Figure 46: Blob figure (age 3)**

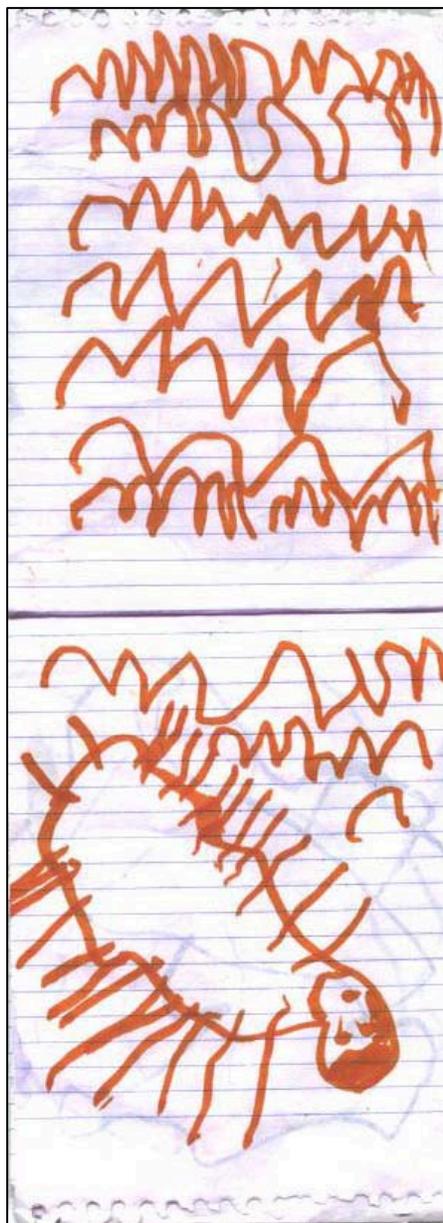
between writing and drawing. This is an assumption on my part, the data speaks to a clear distinction between writing and drawing, but Simon was still not able to discuss such nuances. There is a clear difference between his writing -scribbles, and drawing -blobs (with and without faces). At this point Simon also started to produce work that was pure writing or



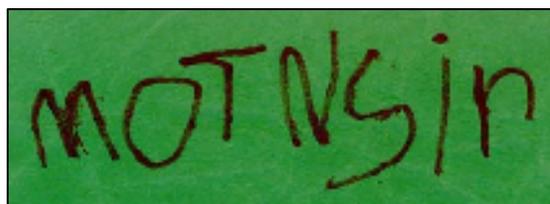
**Figure 47: Simon's writing on its own (The drawing is on the back) Meteor Meltdown (age 4)**

drawing, though it was rare that he wrote without adding a drawing or drew without adding some writing. He clearly saw them both as meaning making systems that supported each other but as mutually exclusive (see figure 47 & 48). Simon wrote several books using scribble writing and others containing only illustrations.

From the time Simon was four years old he entertained two distinct hypotheses about writing: 1) that writing is a meaning making process and its form is less important than meaning; 2) that writing you share with others must have letters, resulting in him using random letter strings for his writing. These hypotheses translated into Simon's continuation of scribbles as a form of personal writing long after he started using letters in his writing (see figure 48), in much the same way that Emily did. Later, Simon added to this hypothesis that the letters were associated loosely with spoken sounds; resulting in Simon applying a



**Figure 48: Scribble book (age 5)**



**Figure 49: Sign for Doghouse (age 5)**  
Doghouse

phonetic hypothesis to his writing without having a conventional phonology to his oral language (Simon's articulation was delayed. He had difficulty saying many common sounds including 's', 'er', 'l' and most blends). Thankfully, Simon was ready and willing to orally share his writing (see figure 49). This type of writing started to become prevalent in all of Simon's writing as he started to produce it with family members and friends as the intended audience. He had many older friends who were very gracious and encouraged him in his writing and cartoon production. I find it remarkable that not one of the children Simon shared his work with commented on his peculiar spelling system<sup>2</sup>. I wonder if this has to do with the "*Kindness of Children*" noticed by Vivian Paley (1999). Virtually all the contact Simon had with other children regarding his writing was positive and affirming. I suspect this is more than kindness but a focus on, and a valuing of, meaning making by children that goes beyond my three children. The children Simon interacted with were focused on the meaning of his work, so they did not lord their ability to work accurately over him because accuracy was not even a consideration. It almost seems as if the older children he shared his writing with understood that accuracy is important to adults but in kid culture meaning making was what mattered.

### Writing of Numbers

Simon often wrote numbers as a part of his writing. These numbers were always associated with concrete meaning, not dealing with problems or abstract

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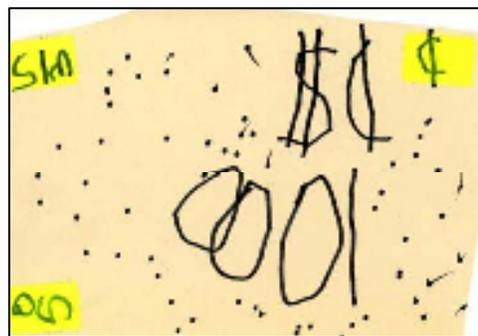
<sup>2</sup> I did need to remind Emily and Tristan on a few occasions that Simon was working on meaning. They were only being overly helpful when Simon was writing and they were trying to support him as best they could.

patterns. The types of numbers he often used were our phone number or street address. These numbers rarely related to quantity or volume but to specific meanings (see figure 50). They were frequent in his writing and the fact that they



**Figure 50:** Drawing with a phone number on top (age 5)

were used separately from letters, scribbles and drawing seems to indicate that Simon understood that they were a separate meaning making system. The one area that was the exception to this pattern of number use was Simon's creation of money as a part



**Figure 51:** Money for dramatic play (age 5)

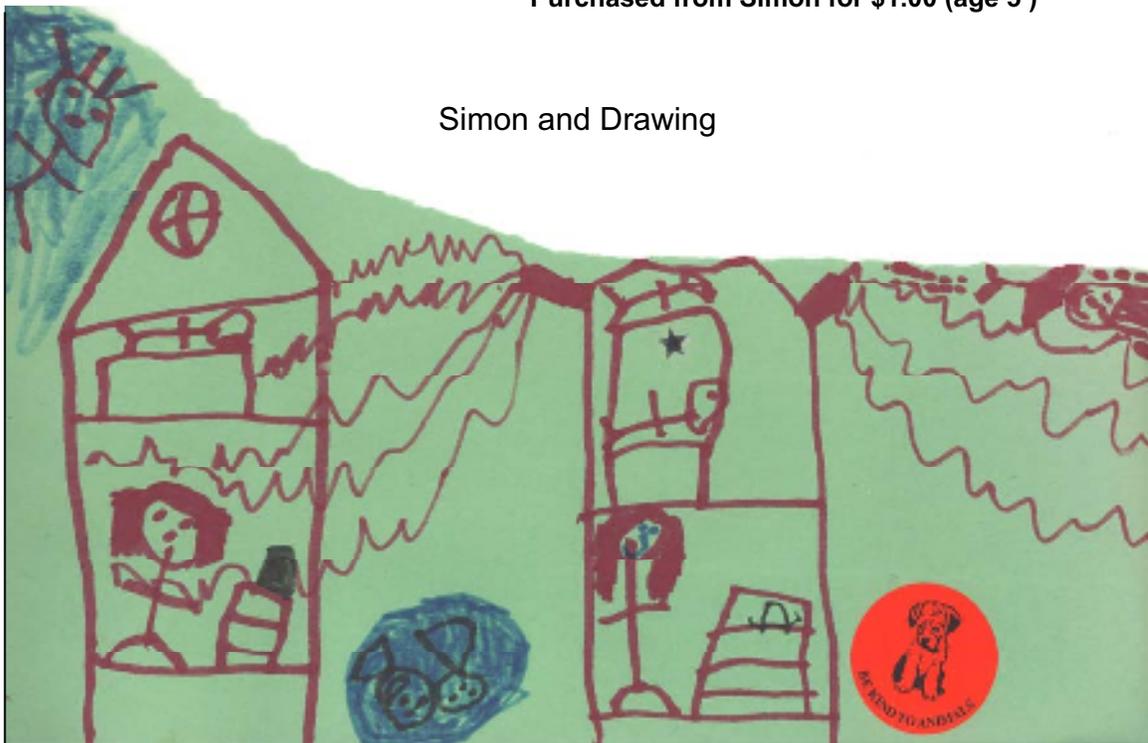
of his dramatic play (see figure 51) or the inclusion of monetary value for art he had decided to sell (see figure 52). Neither Emily nor Tristan did this type of writing. Both of these monetary explorations occurred simultaneously, while Simon was trying to make sense of the whole concept of money. I suspect that he thought of assigning value to his art to ascribe value to the work he did, to add to his savings and so that he would have more money to give away; Simon is very generous with his money. Equally, the pretend money he made was in part for use in the children's dramatic play, and to give away.

It was these two acts that helped me to see Simon's literacies uses as more than a way of understanding and creating meaning in the world but as an extension of himself. Simon is generous and he used these literacies as a way of extending that generosity beyond his current means. Many of the books and drawings he made were intended from their inceptions to be given away as gifts.



**Figure 52:** A cut-away car with a family inside. Purchased from Simon for \$1.00 (age 5)

### Simon and Drawing



**Figure 53:** Picture of a cut-away house with people (age 4)

This distinction between writing and drawing is a completely arbitrary division because so much of Simon's drawing is accompanied by writing and his writing by drawing. For Simon the artistry of his drawings convey as much meaning, if not more, than written text. Rarely did Simon label his drawings; the odd example is in a few family portraits where the different family members are denoted with initials. Simon writes with his pictures or adds pictures to his writing to extend the meaning, not to repeat it. He treats these literacies as separate, but complementary, semiotic processes. Even when Simon draws a schematic of a car or a house, he does not label his illustration (see figures 52-54), as Emily and Tristan both did. He lets the drawing stand on its own merits, to convey meaning, and the text he adds is of a separate meaning; for example, "for Mama", or something else to add to the drawing, not repeating the drawing itself (see figure 54).

Many of Simon's drawings include an element of transparency, or a sense of being able to see through various layers. Many of these are schematics or cutaway pictures explore how things work or how people live (see figures 52 - 54). It appears he used these drawings as a way of trying to figure out how things work or are arranged in the world, or to better



**Figure 54:** A cut-away house "for mama" (age 5)

represent how he saw the world around him. His cars and houses were always transparent, with the people clearly visible on the inside; emphasizing the world as social. For Simon the world is about people and how people, and in some cases animals, interact in the world. It is interesting to note that even when Simon drew animals they were always personified (see figure 55).



**Figure 55: Spy Dog Gets Angry (p. 4 of *Spy Dog 1*) (age 6)**

His drawings were always about the social world in which he lived; as the youngest of three children he had never known what it was like to be alone, and though he often chose to play alone it was always with the conscious knowledge that others were near. He often commented on where family members or friends

were in the house in relation to himself; even when they were not playing with him it was important for him to know where they were. Simon's drawings were a deeply social expression of how he saw the world. It was the interactions people have within their environment and with various objects that made these things important and worthy of representation.

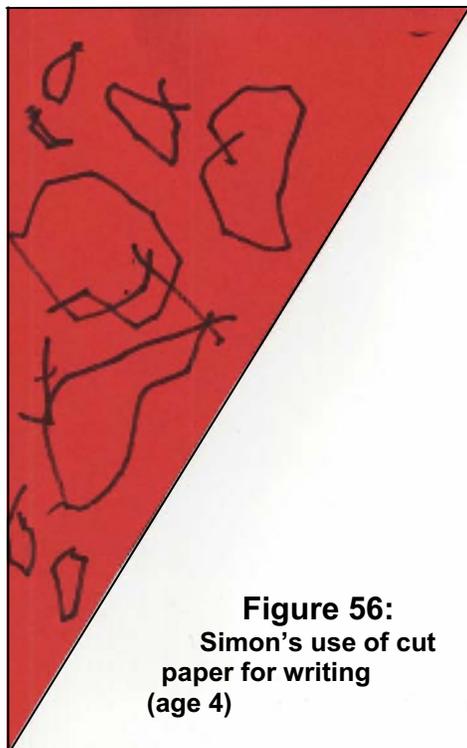
### Simon's use of Literacies in Three Dimensions

Simon's explorations in writing and drawing were not confined to pen, ink, pencil, paint, crayon and marker. Simon explored the canvas or media he used as well as what he was creating. He experimented with play dough, clay, Popsicle sticks, tubes, Lego®, and Lincoln Logs®. The intensity and attention he paid to these things warrant my consideration. Some of them, like the exploration of various types of canvases for his drawings or writing, are clearly just another part of the drawing/writing process that Simon included as a part of exploration of meaning production. While others, like Lego, were used as a literate experience in and of themselves.

### Simon's use of Different Media for Meaning Production

Simon did some extraordinary work with the paper that he chose to write and draw on. In many instances Simon seemed to care less about what he was writing/drawing on, often writing on the front of the text dense drafts I offered to him for his work. But other times he was very deliberate and intentional about the

medium he chose to work with. He regularly chose to rip or cut the paper he was using before he wrote/drew on it (see figures 53 & 56). This interest in the third



**Figure 56:**  
Simon's use of cut  
paper for writing  
(age 4)



**Figure 57:** "Telescope for looking at things" (age 5)



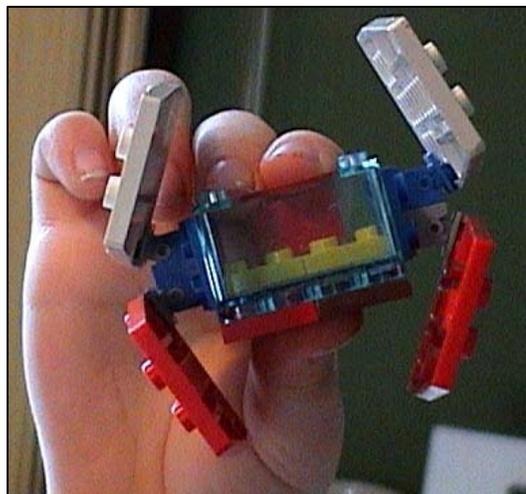
**Figure 58:** "No  
touching." (written  
on a block) (age 4)

dimensional space has been documented by Kress (2003), but it was not until Simon started to use tubes to write on (see figure 57) that I noticed that he was as focused on the media on which he was writing as he was on the content. Simon's exploration of the media only worked to underscore the complexity of his understanding and use of writing. In many ways Simon's hypothesis of writing worked to challenge my underlying assumptions about writing and point to more complexity than even Emily and Tristan had taught me. Simon's use of tubes, torn/cut paper, and wooden blocks demonstrated an intentionality to use different media to express meaning (see figures 56-58). Simon's perspective, or understanding, of literacies as multimodal in every way worked to further push

my understanding of literacies and how children use them to create meaning, not to mention that it added new layers of complexity to my notion of literacies. He showed me that what he was using in the creation of meaning went far beyond the message and the mode to also include the medium. This suggests that the learning of a literacy, such as writing, contains further layers of complexity that extend to the medium and that the simple notion that writing is done on paper is simple only in that for adults it is tacitly assumed. For a child learning to write the medium itself is arbitrary and is paid attention to. Simon has never felt confined by paper for conveying meaning in writing or in other literacies. One medium Simon explored beyond the mostly two dimensional world of writing and drawing was Lego.

### Simon's use of Lego

For Simon the primary attraction of Lego is his ability to use it to express his ideas in three dimensions and interact with the creation. Many of the same themes that Simon was exploring in his drawing found their way into his Lego creations; most frequently boats and Star Wars (see figure 59). Simon bought Lego sets not to build the set, though he did occasionally do this, but for the shapes and parts that would help him make new



**Figure 59: A Mini-Star Wars ship (age 5)**

creations which he based on his imagination, known objects and research he did through Lego Magazine and the Lego website.

Simon would gather all the Lego together to create fanciful ships and buildings. He would use the Lego people in much the same way the children would use Playmobil®, constructing dramatic plays; the primary difference being that he would create whole worlds for his Lego 'guys'- vehicles, houses, communities. Similar to his exploration of his social world in his drawings, Simon created whole societies out of Lego. He built new Lego creations to support these worlds, and these were not just supports but sculptures that were art in their own right. Simon often chose to do this work alone, especially after Tristan started to spend his time reading as much as Emily did. He was not playing with Lego just for the social interaction with his siblings, though he welcomed their company, he worked on Lego to create his own meanings. He was using the Lego to figure out and represent the world as it was and as it might be. He would often create and work through lived experiences, encouraged by Emily, where they would create a store, school, library, or other common place that we would visit and enact scenes that were a reflection of the type of activities that happen in those places. Other times his play would include possible happenings in these places, usually including 'bad guys', where they would rob the bank and be chased by police. Regardless of the actual story, the Lego would be the vehicle for the story telling in a manner similar to drama, drawing, or written stories, except that Lego involved the element of creating a three dimensional world for interaction. As with most of the arts the meaning making process took

precedence over the permanency of the final product. Simon enjoyed the level of interaction that he could get through engaging with the Lego and other three dimensional literacies that went beyond the flat world of print. For Simon Lego was a complex semiotic meaning-making system. And Lego play became a literacy in its own right.

### Conclusions

For Simon literacies are social, reflect how he sees and interacts with the world, and are an extension of who he is as a person. He is a literacies user in a very rich sense, constantly exploring and finding new ways to create and understand meaning. For Simon literacies were always about meaning making. Meaning was and still is the principle purpose of using a literacy.

Simon has invented what literacies mean to him and has used them accordingly. He has created the forms for the meanings he wanted to express, out of all the materials, ideas and experiences that were available to him; creating new uses and understandings from the common everyday literacies he found used and created by others. Simon has shown me that it is crazy to think that we can confine literacies to a singular meaning and form. I know that without convention there would be no way to communicate with others outside of immediate family and friends; but, just perhaps, we should allow young children to shape what literacies mean for themselves until they are ready to share with others. As Simon has demonstrated here it is not just meaning he is creating and using; it is himself. The literacies he chose to identify with also shaped who he

was and how he perceived himself. The choice of which literacies one uses and how is deeply personal. To restrict the literacies uses and understandings of young children is to restrict who they are and, more importantly, who they may become.

With Simon I had the advantage of having learned from Emily and Tristan; with him I was ready and I learned much. Simon taught me that my expanding understanding of literacies was still far too simple. I had considered the inclusion of sign systems as literacies but ignored the mediums used to convey these literacies as significant and often arbitrary. He also taught me that my concept of literacies as social constructions was limited to adult modes of understanding.

Through Simon I was able to understand literacies as even more complex in their composition and use. Literacies learning is an incredibly complex process. There is so much that we take for granted and is tacit, as full members of the literacy club, that we cannot possibly directly teach what we know. Simon uses his understanding of literacies as multiple and complex to create meaning which is rich, amazing and beautiful (see figure 60). His use of literacies goes beyond what I imagined possible.



**Figure 60: Sketch (age 5)**