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# HORIZONS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN OUTDOOR LEARNING

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# FAIRIES



## OUTDOOR DISCOVERIES SEARCHING FOR FAIRIES OUTDOORS

### AUTHOR

Tracy Hayes, University of Cumbria

A qualified youth worker and community development professional, Tracy takes a playfully narrative approach to her work. She is lead editor of the book *Storytelling: Global perspectives on narrative* (Brill, 2019) and is convenor of the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Nature, Outdoor Learning and Play Special Interest Group, and Social Media and Website Officer for the Royal Geographical Society's (RGS) Social and Cultural Geographies Research Group (SCGRG).

### AUTHOR

Charlotte Murphy

Charlotte is currently working to save money for travelling in a self-built camper van. She plans to apply for a masters in youth criminal justice, specialising in young people with learning disabilities.





In this article, we tell the story of Charlotte’s research to explore how stories, imagination and creativity can add awe, wonder and fun in a way that enables us to find our own magic outdoors – whatever our age.

This is the third, and final, of the Outdoor Discoveries series. It draws on the first two articles in this series (1, 2), along with reflections on Tracy’s research and practice, and incorporates these of Charlotte, a recent graduate whose third year dissertation study explored the experiences of a family who went looking for fairies. Since leaving university, Charlotte has gone on to work in social care, most recently caring for her Nan, who has advanced dementia.

Her dissertation was titled: *The supporting role of fairies in childhood imaginative play*. This was not the research Charlotte had originally intended to undertake. She was finding it difficult to pick a topic, and had been exploring several different ideas around children, young people, and criminal and social justice, when she participated in a research methods workshop led by Tracy.

Here, alongside her classmates, she followed instructions to,

*“Think back to your childhood and remember an experience that you had outside as a child” (2, 3).*

For Charlotte, following this process unlocked long-forgotten memories of playing with her friends – real and imaginary. She laughed as she told classmates about the fairies she shared her life with as a child.

Her earliest memories are of playing in a mystical world of fairies and pixies, and teddy bear picnics. She recalls watching a video from her local library, called *The Fairies*, which followed the adventures of Harmony (the golden fairy) and Rhapsody (the rainbow fairy) and their friends (4). They would sing, dance and play games, and they lived at the bottom of a garden in an old oak tree.

Marriott explains,

*“When you hear the expression ‘Away with the fairies’, you imagine someone rather useless. Someone chronically distracted, with a short attention span and no common sense. Someone – if we’re not being polite – a bit batty” (5).*

It is an expression not usually used as a compliment, but to bring attention to those of us (the authors included) who are daydreamers, often lost in thought, with vivid imaginations. Like Tracy, Charlotte recalls finding school a challenge:

*“Much to my teachers’ dismay, my imagination was not limited to play times and I struggled in conventional classroom learning activities because I did not concentrate well.”*

When Charlotte was five years old, she wrote letters to fairies, especially one:

*“Amanda: my tooth fairy, my friend and my own personal wish granter”*

She left them around the house when she went to bed. On waking in the morning, she was delighted to find another letter written back to her, left in the same place. She told her family stories of fairy parties and enjoyed adventures with Amanda in the garden and woods behind her house.

The question of if fairies were real, did not emerge until Charlotte was much older, and by then she was able to respond with reference to academic theories and research. For example, drawing on Harrington’s observation of children engaging with the fairy village created at a school:

*“... whether or not the children believe in fairies is often unimportant. Once they have encountered something that is potentially magical, the role the students embody in their imaginative play becomes that of an individual who believes in fairies and is attending to their happiness” (6).*

Charlotte remains emphatic that she believed (believes?) in fairies.

Charlotte, the final year university student, texted her mum to ask if she remembered the fairies, and her mum texted back with photos of the letters that she'd kept safe over the years – treasured family mementos. She shared them with her classmates, and Tracy shared some stories from her years in practice as an environmental educator.

One of Charlotte's classmates is a grandmother and invited her to join her family at an outdoor setting that had lots of fairy houses. So, Charlotte went out to play with the grandmother, her daughter and two granddaughters – one of whom was aged five (a serendipitous coincidence). We protect their identity by naming them here as Nanny, Mother and Child. Tracy was invited along too, as photographer and note-taker. This experience enabled Charlotte to consider intergenerational perspectives, alongside reviewing literature, her own reflections and conversations with Tracy.

### What Charlotte and Tracy found

A fairy house is a small home designed for fairies, gnomes and woodland creatures to live in (7). In comparison, trolls' houses tend to be much bigger and are often found beneath bridges (8), whilst unicorns favour '... free, shared, un-programmed spaces (most often with trees in them)' (9).

There are lots of different kinds of fairy houses. Some are made completely from natural materials, gathered up and repurposed. Others include manmade objects, sometimes even representations of the fairies themselves. In Harrington's account of children engaging with the school's fairy village, she is careful to explain that the students create fairy houses themselves from naturally occurring objects (6). The only rule they have is that they cannot damage living things or else the fairies will not come and visit.

This means that they cannot pull bark off a tree, however if the bark is already on the floor when they find it, then they may use it. Creating fairy houses encourages children to observe the materials at their disposal in their immediate environment, developing observation skills and inspiring an appreciation of what is around them (10). This may also enable them to feel a kind of freedom that is not found indoors – it is a less demanding environment, which offers children space to be themselves with less inhibition (11).

In Charlotte's research study, she did not observe a noticeable difference in the family's engagement with the alternative forms of houses, the children she was with were as enchanted by those with manmade objects as they were with the natural ones. We now share some of the encounters with fairies that happened during that magical day.

## LOOKING FOR FAIRIES

When we (Charlotte and Tracy) arrived at the site, we were given a map marking the locations of some of the fairy doors that could be found. Charlotte's initial thoughts were that this may alter the family's engagement through setting an objective for the child – to find the fairy doors. When the family joined us, Mother handed Charlotte a small piece of paper. It was a card the child had made for the fairies that we would meet.

We set off to explore: the child was on a mission, map in hand, wellies on foot, to find the fairy homes. We huddled around various gnarly tree trunks, peeping into the small windows of the fairy



houses, seeing if the child could spot anything. Charlotte and the child crouched down next to a small fairy house built into the fork between tree roots, hoping for a magical moment. Gently, Charlotte whispered,

*"Can you see anything?"*

Carefully placing her hands onto the trunk, avoiding the muddy patches, Child leant in closer. Charlotte watched her gazing into the dark space, when suddenly she exclaimed,

*"I saw a wing!"*

Charlotte recalls feeling excited, giggling gleefully, feeling as she had when she was a child when she saw fairies.

The child ran back through the wood to her mother and grandmother.

*"Nanny! I saw a fairy!"*

Her grandmother and mother both responded enthusiastically.

*"What did she look like?"*

her mother asked, crouching down to give her full attention.

"She had gold wings, a gold crown... she was the tooth fairy!"



The child had recently lost two of her front teeth, and her mother told us that the fairy had left her a present under her pillow.

The child quickly moved on to the next house. When we caught up with her, she was beside another fairy house, built into the trunk of a fallen tree. As we approached, the child joined us on the path to tell us there were lots of fairies in that tree. She told us in a matter-of-fact way:

*"The tree is really friendly for fairies."*

Child spent most of her time running ahead of the group, map in one hand, pencil in the other, searching around trees for more houses, until she found a tree with several houses around it. Mother and Child approached each house, carefully avoiding stepping on the spring flowers nearby.

The child knocked politely on each fairy door and the ones that opened she put her mouth to the doorway and whispered

*"Hello?"*

then turned her head, listening for a reply. She did not find any more fairies, but we watched from a distance as Mother, Nanny and Child laughed and chatted animatedly together.

As we moved further through the garden, she pointed to a circle of logs and said,

*"Look, I can see a fairy!"*

and ran toward them. Charlotte followed and told her,

*"When I was little, my mum used to tell me that a circle of dark grass, or logs or toadstools was a fairy ring. That's where they have their parties! Maybe we just missed them. Sometimes I left sandwiches and cake out for them."*

Child did not say anything, just looked at her for a moment, before running back to her nanny. She told Nanny that we had just seen a fairy party, and they were eating cake and sandwiches.

By the end of the trail, as the adults were stood talking, Charlotte noticed the child squelching in muddy puddles. For a while she just watched, then joined her. She copied her, moving her feet up and down to make squelching sounds. At some point, unnoticed by Charlotte, the child stopped. Totally mesmerised by the sound of the mud and moving her boots through it, creating shapes and swirling it around, it wasn't until Tracy asked Charlotte a question that she realised that it was just her playing in the mud, and everyone was ready to leave. We think she may have been away with the fairies...

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#### IMAGES

Tree house image on page 37 has been sourced from pxhere.com. Other images have been supplied by the authors. Photographers retain copyright.

## What does this mean for practitioners in Outdoor Learning?

As Harrington (6) explains, the simple joy derived from magical experiences can be traced to the idea that anything is possible. This applies to adults like Charlotte as well as to children. We can see from the stories shared here, that the adults and children respond to each other's narrative cues (12), sharing and developing the fairy experiences.

A tree that is friendly for fairies is likely to welcome animals too, providing an introduction to wildlife-watching for children.

We see that the child stepped away from using the map; although she kept it firmly held in her hand, she did not follow the trail. Close inspection of the map revealed it is designed to be open to interpretation, there is no 'one set route', instead it encourages wandering and exploration, enabling serendipitous, magic moments.

This echoes the approach to Outdoor Learning advocated by Loynes, who cautions that,

*"the serendipitous encounters of the heart with the landscape are squeezed out by the map work approach to the outdoors" (13).*

Children enjoy activities like this because it enables them to take control of their learning and be creative, which is likely to capture their attention for longer than being told what to do and how to create things. The processes of making houses, hunting for them, sharing them and being conscious not to hurt the environment presents countless developmental opportunities.

Play is a sociable development process. As their language matures, children are able to play in multiple roles, using their voices to differentiate the imaginary world they are immersed in and their own voices to create the scene, as we saw in the stories shared here.

Prompting the child to expand her imagination or use it in ways she may not have done before, benefits her learning. For example, asking questions such as,

*"Do you see anything?" or, "What did the fairy look like."*

expands her imaginary narrative and allows her to decide what she believes they look like.

Our questions for you are similar to those Tracy asked in 2014 (3):

Do you make time and space for play – for yourself and for others around you?

Do you encourage others to make use of their imaginations?

Do you share your stories, and listen when others tell you theirs?

Finally, are you responsive – for example, how do you respond when a child tells you they have seen a fairy, presenting you with a narrative cue?

Charlotte and I are going to give the final words to Rachel Carson (14), which we have slightly amended to include us:

*"If [we] had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over (...) all children, [we] should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life."*

Let's keep finding joy and hope, noticing magic moments and searching for fairies – and other magical creatures – outdoors ■

## CREATE A FAIRY GARDEN

Click [here](#) to download a mini guide to making fairy gardens (with general learning outcomes) by Learning through Landscapes.



## BUILD YOUR NATURE KNOW-HOW

Make the most of your green spaces with seasonal tips – including how to build a wildlife pond from page 39.