

# Seen and Heard: Creative spaces for belonging in school

Priory Community School Academy  
Key Stage 3

Creative organisation: Super Culture

## Background to the school

Priory Community School Academy (PCSA) is situated in Queensway, Weston-Super-Mare, North Somerset. It is a non-selective mainstream secondary 11-16 school with around 1,500 pupils and is part of the Priory Learning Trust. Priory School prides itself on being a "happy community school where students come first". It seeks to offer a whole-child approach to learning based around the school's values of aspiration, integrity and respect, and supports its pupils to become "responsible citizens...who are confident and resilient young people with high self-esteem and are not afraid to take risks".

## Background to Super Culture

Super Culture describes itself as "a pioneering initiative that places outstanding cultural activity at the heart of Weston-Super-Mare's daily life...We work with local communities and partners to create inclusive, ambitious cultural experiences that build skills, nurture social connection, spark understanding, and bring joy. Through public festivals, socially engaged projects, cross-sector partnerships, and talent development for local creatives, we aim to break down barriers, strengthen communities, and bring the extraordinary into everyday life".

## Specific residency objectives for Super Culture:

- To support children at risk of Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) in developing a positive sense of belonging and identity within the school setting.
- To create opportunities for creative self-expression and collaboration.
- To embed children's perspectives into the school site through visual, spatial, or performative art.
- To trial a model of artist-led placemaking as a preventative approach to school disengagement.
- To inform future whole-school strategies for inclusion and mental health support.

## Specific residency objectives for Priory Community School Academy:

- To improve self-confidence and self-esteem for pupils with EBSA and those at risk of EBSA within school and wider social settings.
- To support young people with EBSA or at risk of EBSA in developing their self-esteem, resilience and general wellbeing.

**Aims and synopsis for the residency**

Priory Community School Academy were approached by WEMA’s Cultural Education Hub and Super Culture to work collaboratively to develop a toolkit based around using artistic practices to support young people with, or at risk of, emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA). Super Culture’s ambition is to create a toolkit for and with young people that can be used to support schools in encouraging more young people with EBSA to develop a sense of belonging, community, place and identity and to support preventative measures for those at risk of EBSA. As with many schools across England, Priory School has seen a rise in persistent absence since the Covid-19 pandemic and also a shift in parental attitudes to school attendance. This residency aligned closely with the strategic conversations and work on EBSA already taking place at Priory School and they were interested in how it could tap into the interests of specific students, with the ambition of supporting them to attend school regularly and to embrace the opportunities offered to them by the school through building their confidence and self-esteem, resilience and general wellbeing. Leadership at Priory School highlighted that the thresholds for young people to gain mental health support through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) had risen and some young people who may previously have had support were no longer eligible, and that CAMHS support was not always effective.

“ It was interesting how different areas of the [primary] school (like the gate or the head's office) could mean totally different things to different individuals. ”

Mike Akers, Creative Practitioner



Photo Courtesy of Super Culture

Working in collaboration with Priory School’s student welfare team, a small number of KS3 pupils (aged 11 to 14) were approached by the school’s Operational Student Attendance Lead to offer them the opportunity to be involved with this residency. Eight students took up the offer of attending workshops with creative practitioners from Super Culture. Six sessions took place at the start of the school day in January and February 2026, approximately weekly. Each session was facilitated by a creative practitioner from Super Culture alongside two artists who were trained by young people with experience of being outside the formal school system. Workshops were based around opening up conversation and honest discussion about thoughts and feelings on school, education and learning alongside artistic processes of creating and making which were tailored to these young people’s interests (including, in this case, games, lego and robots). A pro-active, positive approach to highlighting issues around the young people’s physical and emotional connections to the school and thinking about and discussing possible solutions to challenges raised was central to each workshop.

A playlist of the young people’s musical choices was also created for use in each session to make the environment more conducive and welcoming. The final session culminated in the participants collaborating to create a large Snakes and Ladders display of aspects of their work across the residency.

Prior to working with the students at Priory School, two creative practitioners from Super Culture led a workshop with a class of 22 Year 4 pupils at Worle Village Primary School, using discussion and creative techniques to gather pupils’ perspectives on their attitudes to school, the school environment and education, identifying what they celebrate and what they might want to change. This led to pupils writing letters to “the big kids” (in secondary school) about their thoughts and feelings about school and identity and designing envelopes to present the letters. The session culminated in writing down as many words as they could which they associated with school in a short amount of time. The thinking and writing



Photo Courtesy of Super Culture

“ We did speak to the children first rather than just saying “yeah, you've got to go along to this”. We wanted them to buy into it so they understood what they were doing as well. Because otherwise, we didn't want them not to engage with such a precious resource [the residency]. ”

Serena Robertson, Operational Student Attendance Lead, Priory School

produced by the Year 4 pupils in this workshop was used as a stimulus within one of the sessions at Priory School and also impacted the thinking about the design and content of the toolkit.

Super Culture’s lead creative practitioner kept a journal and detailed session notes throughout the residency, which was shared as part of the research, alongside a final impact report being produced by Super Culture. The reflections on each session and the activities that were trialled with the young people are central to the creation of the toolkit, alongside the feedback and ideas from the young people themselves, who were aware from the start of the residency that their contributions within the sessions would support the development of the toolkit.

The toolkit is being shaped with the help of Learning Everywhere CIC, to develop the ideas and learning from the residency workshops into language that is commonly understood within schools and adaptable for adults working in a range of roles with children and young people of different ages and backgrounds.

**Key Outcomes**

**Young People**

➤ Priory School kept registers for each session. Two young people attended all six sessions. Two attended five, two attended four, one attended two sessions and one attended one. Particularly for those attending the majority of sessions, this in itself was considered a success by the student welfare lead, noting that the sessions were held at the start of the school day and encouraged some pupils to come into school on that day and positively engage in the workshops. Whilst only accessed by a small number of pupils, Priory School were pleased to be able to offer this residency opportunity to these young people, noting the importance of tapping into their interest and recognising that a range of interventions better meets the range of needs and preferences for encouraging positive relationships with school.

➤ The young people attending workshops had a variety of views on the balance of art and talking in the sessions, some wanting more art and some wanting more opportunities to talk. This demonstrates the challenges in finding a happy balance; something which the artists constantly tried to adapt to in this residency.

“Most students highlighted the need for teachers to approach them in an empathetic manner, understanding their emotional needs.”

Casey Lloyd, Creative Facilitator,  
Super Culture



Photo Courtesy of Super Culture

➤ Feedback from the lead creative practitioner described how 1:1 conversations were conducive to eliciting a range of responses and ideas from the young people that were often nuanced and individualised and that didn't come out to the same extent through group discussion.

➤ Recurring themes emerging through discussion about school in multiple workshops included these young people "feeling overwhelmed", "lacking in motivation" and "not having the tools to regulate". All of these are important in tackling emotional based school avoidance, and these are already identified in many of the EBSA toolkits used by schools (including the guidance and programme used at Priory School). The approach of "listening first and then putting in strategies to support young people" are followed already, but the potential uniqueness of this work is the use of the creative arts to support young people's thinking and conversations alongside highlighting practical strategies to support them in feeling more comfortable and willing to come to school and engage in learning.

“ A good teacher accommodates for what you need and I feel as though I can talk to them. ”

KS3 pupil

➤ Many of the points of discussion elicited that these young people don't like being put on the spot or singled out, and that teachers need to find empathetic ways to help them settle into a class when they are late without doing this. Their perceptions of spaces, events, expectations, relationships and routines were also notable and raise some interesting points to be fed into the toolkit. How they felt about themselves as learners was also a recurrent theme.

➤ Another interesting outcome was that these young people expressed that they would like to have someone (adult / carer) to advocate for them during tricky conversations on school attendance. Some young people expressed that they felt they had a better rapport with support staff than the safeguarding team and found them easier to approach because they knew them better. Some discussed finding it easier to get into conversations about thoughts and feelings if scale questions are asked first, as this helps to frame their thinking.

➤ Students shared that the sessions helped some of the students be heard/listened to and provided a better sense of how they were feeling about themselves. One felt it broke down the barriers of attendance, so they felt that they could now speak about the anxiety around this, demonstrating a growth in confidence. Others still had anxiety about school and felt that they could have done with more sessions.

➤ Pupils reported that they enjoyed the sessions and would recommend it to other students that had worries/anxieties based around school, mentioning that they enjoyed the creative content.

➤ Year 4 pupils at Worle Village Primary School were responsive to the workshop. Adults from the school were in the room throughout the session. Their discussion and ideas elicited that different pupils see the same situations and even spaces in a range of ways, sometimes even polarised, which is perhaps unsurprising but gives much for schools to think about in supporting many children within one class.

➤ Even when some staff are in the session (such as in the primary school workshop in this residency), what the young people produce and talk about could be of great interest and of key importance to helping staff in the school gain better insights into the thoughts and feelings of their pupils. The letters written by the Year 4 pupils will be shared with the teachers at Worle Village Primary School retrospectively to aid this understanding.

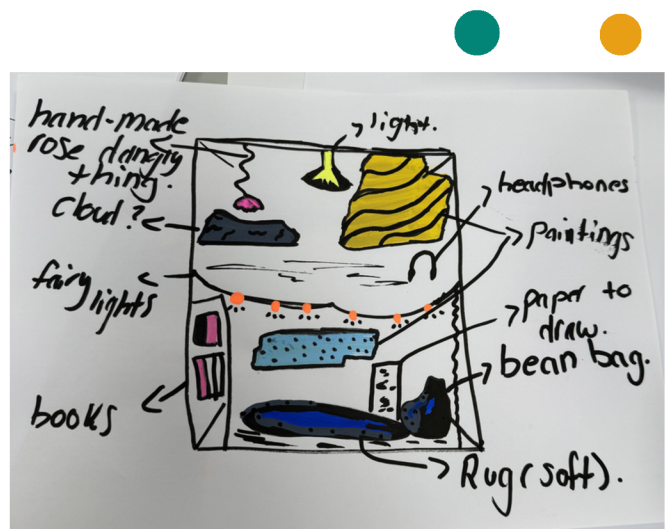


Photo Courtesy of Super Culture

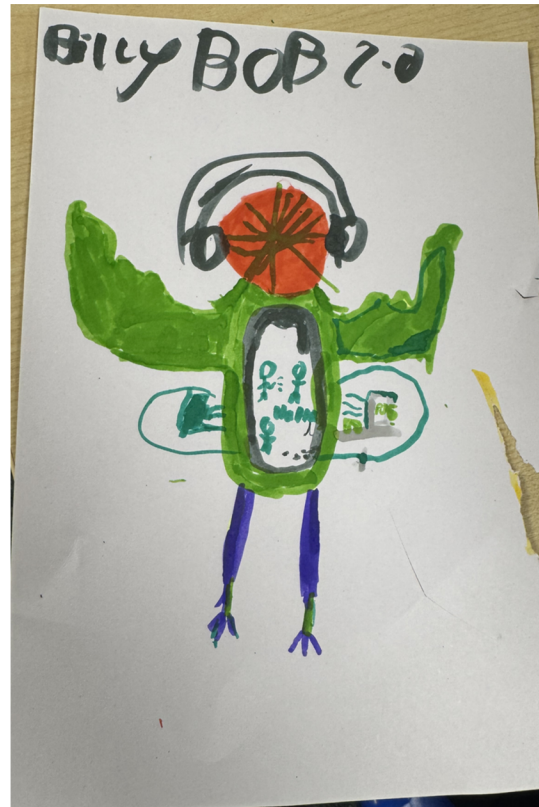
**Staff**

➤ Staff from Priory School did not attend or observe any of the sessions. The student welfare team felt that this would give pupils more opportunities to talk freely and express themselves more honestly and openly than if staff from the school were present in the sessions. Nevertheless, the information elicited from conversations in the workshops relating specifically to the thoughts and feelings of these young people is very insightful. Finding ways to share this with staff so that specific strategies can be developed and implemented is crucial to tackling EBSA, which the school staff pointed out is often personal to each individual young person.

➤ Priory School’s Operational Student Attendance Lead is still keen for staff in the school to be offered a continuing professional development session by Super Culture on the toolkit and how the teachers and support staff will be able to flexibly use the toolkit to support other at-risk young people, support earlier intervention work and as an additional offer to families in attendance meetings. This CPD is funded as part of the residency and will be planned for the summer term 2026.

➤ As Priory is part of a multi-academy trust (MAT), they can see the potential benefits of staff from across the Priory Learning Trust attending CPD to use the toolkit across schools.

➤ The Operational Student Attendance Lead highlighted the importance of meeting with the artists to understand the purpose, processes and outcomes for the sessions. Communication and everyone prioritising the time for this is crucial and yet challenging.



*Photo Courtesy of Super Culture*

**Creative practitioners**

➤ Insightful feedback was provided via reflective journal entries after each workshop by the lead creative practitioner, who attended all of the secondary school workshops. This practitioner reflected honestly and candidly on the effectiveness of the planning, the quality of the questions which framed each session, and the appropriateness of the tasks.

➤ The reflective journal was also punctuated with young people’s comments and reactions, insightful reflections, emergent questions, and suggestions about how the processes and feedback could be used or adapted or developed within the written version of the toolkit. Alongside the session plans, it provided a thorough overview of the thinking behind the week-to-week design of the residency, alongside capturing young people’s reactions and dialogue in the workshops.

**Unexpected outcomes, challenges and further considerations**

➤ It can be very challenging for arts and creative organisations to find schools who are willing and flexible to work with them, even when funding is provided, and yet it is vital to hear young people’s views and lived experiences to tackle issues which impact their daily lives in impactful ways that are meaningful to the young people themselves. Finding the right people in schools to talk to about potential collaborations is key; the school engagement team at Priory School ‘jumped at the chance’ to secure this opportunity for their pupils as they felt it aligned with their current work and priorities and, being funded through the residency, is something they would not be able to trial otherwise due to funding constraints.

➤ Not having staff from the school in workshops demonstrates the need for, and importance of, good channels of communication between key school staff and visiting practitioners. Without this, developing the school’s understanding of how their young people think, feel and act may be diminished. There is much to be debated within creative arts programmes in this regard, particularly the balance between confidentiality and sharing. Collaborative planning and feedback time should be embedded into future residencies to promote the potential impact of the workshops.

➤ The first session started late because of the time taken for DBS clearance to be sorted out when the creative practitioners arrived at the school for the first time. This should happen in advance of a residency starting and be built into the planning time,

also allowing for ample setup time prior to each workshop.

➤ It can be difficult and frustrating to sort out regular times and suitable spaces when working with schools, and particularly in secondary schools where there is often less flexibility within the school day than in primary schools.

➤ This work, which is concerned with supporting vulnerable students and their wellbeing, highlights the need for creative practitioners within any project to understand their responsibilities with regard to disclosure and safeguarding. This is something which has been built in as part of WEMA’s training for all creative practitioners as part of their funding agreement within this Creative Hub programme and was on the radar in this residency.

➤ In this residency, having a learning mentor who knew the young people participating and who was able to talk to students and support them in getting to the sessions (and to and from classes) was important. This role should be present in all such programmes, despite the inevitable pull on a school’s resources, as without it, young people may feel less inclined or able to attend, which diminishes the potential impact of such work with practitioners from outside the school.



We asked, what questions/conversations do you find difficult to answer when asked by adults in a school setting about attendance?



Casey Lloyd, Creative Facilitator, Super Culture

➤ This residency recognised the need to look at the issue of school avoidance more widely (including across the primary to secondary transition) and Super Culture did a small amount of work with a primary school from one year group on this. Whilst Super Culture could not persuade a feeder school to Priory School to take part, the two schools are close together geographically and some of the issues, challenges and provocations raised by the Year 4 pupils are likely to be relatable to all schools and communities.

➤ Future residences could consider how to work effectively with academy chains and linked schools to maximise the impact. In this particular residency, this may be achieved through the offer of staff training next term.

“ I think the conversation is something that they [the primary school] will take forward, like things about those key spaces and those transitions between lunchtime and playtime that I don't think there is a lot of opportunity for reflection and feedback from children in terms of how their day is run when they go into school. ”

George Tivenan-Densley, Executive Director, Super Culture

➤ Super Culture's original proposal for this residency included using pre- and post-intervention scales to elicit participants' responses about their wellbeing; the facilitators decided not to collect this information, due to the small group size and needs of the group, instead using verbal or anecdotal check ins. The attendance data collected by Priory School before, during and just after the residency showed, unsurprisingly, no clear pattern. The School Attendance Team recognise the limitations and challenges of using and interpreting data, especially so soon after the completion of the residency and where the issues behind school attendance are so complex and varied. They also note that collecting pre-and-post intervention data in the future, alongside qualitative feedback, and taking a longer-term view of the potential impact, could help to open further conversations and work with individual pupils and gives a more balanced indicator of the impact of any intervention for individual young people.



Photo Courtesy of Super Culture



➤ This residency was different to most of the others in this series in that it was led by the artistic organisation who galvanised the support of a school, rather than the other way round. It demonstrates that there is sometimes a case to be made to support an organisation with a vision to lead the work in partnership with schools, to provide funding for creative opportunities to flourish, and to support their vision in developing something unique for a targeted community of young people, as has been the case in this residency. The challenge of this, as ever, is to marry together the needs, priorities and aspirations of all parties, whilst keeping the voices and aspirations of young people themselves right at the centre. It is a model that deserves much more debate and discussion.

➤ At the end of the final session, one young person asked “what happens next, then?”. For the participants, this is a crucial question and it underlines the importance of all residencies having a well thought out exit plan, legacy and strategic plan for sustainability and evolution.

“ When we run things like that, it wouldn't be fair for me to sit in on the sessions because it's a space for the students to be, it's time for them to talk because, they can practically say anything if a member of staff's not there. It's like that conversation between that group. ”

Michele Haberfield, Senior lunchtime supervisor/ Mentor



Photo Courtesy of Super Culture

➤ Having potentially gained the confidence and trust of adults to enable participants to verbalise and share thoughts, feelings, challenges and issues around a range of issues which impact their lives in and out of school, it will inevitably take time for changes or adaptations to be put in place, if this is possible, realistic, desirable or indeed seen and heard. For a young person, this speed or direction of change may in itself bring a range of emotions and/or behaviours.

➤ With any funded programmes, there is a need to consider the “outcomes” and complete reporting soon after programmes finish. In many instances, and particularly with programmes such as this residency that deal with complex, multi-faceted and often longer-term issues, it is perhaps what happens after the dedicated work that is of the most interest. Taking a more longitudinal approach to gauging “success” and legacy is something for arts organisations, schools and funders to give serious consideration to in the future.

**Super Culture**

[superculture.org.uk](http://superculture.org.uk)

Super Culture believe that culture and creativity give people and places superpowers. A charity since 2007, they celebrate the rich diversity of communities and cultures within North Somerset and beyond. Working with communities and with cross-sector partners – including health, education, housing, heritage and justice – they weave culture into the areas of life that matter most to people. Super Culture worked with four artist facilitators to deliver this project:

**Casey Lloyd**

Casey has over 10 years experience working in the creative industries, working both nationally and internationally. As a Producer for Super Culture, he thrives on connecting and amplifying the voices of the communities found within North Somerset. He enjoys co-creating projects with communities, putting their voices into pieces of art that elicit social change and empower people.

[superculture.org.uk/team\\_members/casey](http://superculture.org.uk/team_members/casey)

**Ramona Eve**

Ramona is a participatory artist who uses sculpture, installation, and workshops to engage people in discussions and activities. Her work centres around three key elements: play, people, and props, creating art that empowers individuals and fosters a sense of community and well-being.

[www.ramonaeve.co.uk](http://www.ramonaeve.co.uk)

**Heather Gibson**

Heather is a queer creative on a mission for social change. Armed with thread, experimenting with all things tactile and creating video content - her aim is to shine a light on the misunderstood, misrepresented and mistreated.

[www.watershed.co.uk/studio/residents/heather-gibson](http://www.watershed.co.uk/studio/residents/heather-gibson)

**Mike Akers**

Mike is a writer, theatre maker, early years specialist. He has a long history of working with young people, both as a writer, a teacher and in the pioneering work he has done with Sandra Barefoot and Sarah Moody exploring non-verbal storytelling in Early Years settings.

[www.mikeakers.co.uk](http://www.mikeakers.co.uk)

“ The sessions helped some of the students be heard/listened to [and have a] better sense of how they were feeling about themselves. One felt it broke down the barriers of attendance and the anxiety around this, felt that they now could speak about it, so confidence had grown. Others still had anxiety about school [and] felt that they could have done more sessions. They enjoyed the sessions and would recommend it to other students that had worries/anxieties based around school. ”

Michelle Haberfield, Senior lunchtime supervisor/ Mentor, summarising feedback gathered from students

