



The Brain Builders Lab was a joint initiative of the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative. Its aim was to move Brain Story science, which links childhood trauma to later health outcomes, into action. Between 2019 and 2021, participants in the Brain Builders Lab undertook projects to spread and embed Brain Story science in their communities. This case study along with the others in the series provides practical advice on how to develop and implement projects, along with project impacts and lessons learned.

Consortium pour les élèves du nord de l'Ontario

Brain Builders Lab Case Study

Project Team

- Julie Cull, Therapist, Mental Health Team, Consortium pour les élèves du nord de l'Ontario (at the time of the Brain Builders Lab)

Location

- Northern Ontario

Introduction and Project Goals

The Consortium pour les élèves du nord de l'Ontario (CÉNO) is a non-profit organization created by the six French school boards in Northern Ontario to support and enhance services to students. At the time of the Brain Builders Lab, Julie Cull worked in seven schools across three of the six boards, providing mental health interventions for students and professional development for teachers.

Julie had noticed that the mental health and substance use field tended to focus on treatment for those who are already unwell, rather than prevention and the role of supports such as caring adults. Recognizing that relationships are a key ingredient for building resilience, her aim in joining the Brain Builders Lab was to promote the idea that everyone has a role to play in substance use prevention and mental health promotion, including teachers and schools. Her project goals were:

- To embed Brain Story science within CÉNO's specialized mental health team, complementing the work of the mental health leaders of the six school boards;
- To raise awareness that school personnel could become an additional support system for students, enhancing their role as buffering adults;
- To champion the use of relationship-based teaching, which recognizes that the student-teacher relationship is critical to effective learning; and
- To embed Brain Story science in community systems, further promoting resilience for children and their families.



Knowledge Mobilization Activities

Building a network of champions: Julie began by targeting low-hanging fruit: to create additional champions for the work by sharing information about the Brain Story with the other mental health leads, her colleagues within CÉNO, and the three school boards she worked with directly. The information became part of her regular conversations with colleagues and one-on-one clinical consultations with other therapists.

Unique materials created

- 19 PPT slide decks
- 25 flyers and brochures
- 27 workshop materials
- One staff newsletter

Building staff awareness: Julie also produced professional development workshops for school staff focused on brain development and its relevance to mental health outcomes, including the Brain Architecture Game as a hands-on activity to help participants explore key concepts and deepen their learning. She was purposeful about tying material from the Brain Story to issues that were relevant to each specific audience. She took care to ensure her audience felt like they were being invited into a collaborative discovery and change process rather than simply being told what to do. These efforts were rewarded with early uptake and eagerness among teachers, which was surprising as Julie had thought it might take more time and effort to influence this group.

Raising awareness among networks: Julie took the time early on to develop a 5–10 minute “elevator pitch” so that she was prepared to bring up Brain Story science with colleagues and friends alike. After describing the importance of understanding resilience, Julie was invited to present to parents across all 12 of the French school boards in Ontario through the provincial organization, Parent partenaire en éducation. The organization has expressed interest in further partnerships to promote greater understanding of Brain Story science for parents.

Board-wide workshop attendees

- Speech pathologists
- Occupational therapists
- Behavioural interventionists
- Teachers
- School administrative staff

Development and adaptation of learning materials: To build awareness in the broader community, Julie created resources in both English and French and pushed them out to her networks via email to maximize her reach. With the support of her manager, who championed the work from the beginning, Julie and a team of colleagues from CÉNO also developed resources to support school-based mental health interventions within the six boards. The school mental health leads are currently integrating the resources within each of their boards.

Outcomes and Impact

Shifting mental models: The Brain Story has helped some teachers completely rethink their understanding of student behaviour and their role in building student resilience, and to apply key concepts in their classrooms. Rather than judgment, they now approach students with empathy and understanding. The students are starting to change their beliefs about themselves and their families. One surprising result has been that all the students at one of the alternative high schools returned the following year, which is not typical at this school. Teachers that were early adopters have also gone on to spread brain science in their own professional circles, further enhancing the network of supportive adults for students.

Included in Julie's resource kit

- Fact sheets
- Short papers
- Slide presentations
- Resources from Alberta Family Wellness Initiative
- Compendium document describing each

Practice change: Many therapists have started sharing Brain Story concepts with parents and school personnel as part of their clinical practice. In her own practice, Julie reports that her one-on-one



client therapy outcomes are also better since she shifted to a more trauma-informed approach. For teaching approaches, the brain science facilitated a shift to relationship-based teaching and social-emotional learning. For example, after Julie's executive director presented the link between supportive relationships, brain health and student well-being to key staff at School Mental Health Ontario, the organization approved implementing this approach in a limited number of schools connected to CÉNO. While social-emotional learning was already on the radar for School Mental Health Ontario, the link to brain science may have helped create the necessary buy-in and facilitate approval. In addition, one of CÉNO's six school boards has made relationship-based teaching a key priority for all its schools in 2021-2022.

Organizational change: All six school boards have asked their mental health teams to complete the Brain Story Certification Course. Therapists from a children's mental health community agency also completed the training, having heard of it through their partners within the school board. Several high schools, realizing they likely had a high proportion of students with histories of trauma, which manifested as mental health and substance use issues, also expanded services for their students and changed some of their disciplinary approaches.

Improved collaboration: Several collaborations have developed between the schools and support services. For example, West Nipissing's Suicide Prevention Task Force, a multi-agency collaboration, has piloted an intergenerational program grounded in brain science that connects students with older adults to build natural support systems and resilience in both groups.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

The Brain Story itself does a lot of heavy lifting. Julie attributes her success to the compelling nature of the Brain Story, its relevance and practicality for use in the classroom, and use of the Brain Architecture Game in workshops. The game is actually a cleverly disguised professional development tool that provides hands-on learning and encourages conversations, reflection, team building and deeper understanding of the science.

Use windows of opportunity. Early attempts to get the attention of administration within partner boards met with limited success. However, one superintendent who attended one of Julie's workshops got the ball rolling down a successful path. This superintendent invited her to give the workshop at another school, after which she presented it to the entire team of service directors and pedagogical consultants in that board. Julie also noted that school boards that at first showed little interest became excited about the topic after reviewing the new Brain Story materials some months later.

Strong support from organizational leadership is critical. Having organizational support provided the permission and time needed to focus on the project, and Julie's executive director became a champion for the science who could exert influence at other tables.

Prioritize evaluation. In hindsight, Julie wished she had been more systematic about measuring the changes that are occurring and who is using the information. Her broad awareness-raising efforts did not lend well to tracking the spread of the knowledge or following up with individuals about how the additional resources that were developed were being used.

Brain science and trauma-informed care have become key frameworks guiding CÉNO's core work, but there is still much work to be done. Over the coming years, Julie will work to formalize the integration of the Brain Story into member boards' mental health strategies and action plans, continue to develop and roll out resources for relationship-based teaching, and support staff and the schools in continuing to align with this knowledge base in ways that produce better outcomes for students and families.



Promising developments for potential future partnerships

- The Nipissing–Parry Sound health unit and local Ontario Children’s Mental Health agency are linking children’s wellness to serve and return interactions through a public awareness campaign that is rooted in brain science.
- The Children’s Aid Society has presented on brain science to a broad range of service providers and other school boards, as well as to their foster and adoptive parents.
- The North Bay–Parry Sound District and Sudbury District health units are using the Brain Architecture Game and are integrating brain science into targeted prevention for families.

Resources

- Webinar: [Qui dit COVID-19, dit stress : Bon stress ou mauvais stress?](#)
- Webinar: [Le parent coach : Stratégies de base pour maintenir le bien-être des jeunes](#)
- Infographics and one-pagers: [Ressources CÉNO – Le bien-être](#)
- Resources on reflective listening (being a buffering adult): [Ressources CÉNO – La validation des émotions](#)
- Radio interview: Fascinating People with Drew Ferris: [Oct 4, 2020, Julie Cull and Tina Bouffard](#)
- CCSA impact video: [Student Mental Health in Northern Ontario](#)

