In August 2005, UNICEF Canada invited a team of researchers at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) to design a study that would provide a snapshot of the challenges faced by Canadian teachers and schools in their implementation of global education. The research was conceptualized as a series of exploratory cases, conducted across a small sample of schools and districts in seven Canadian provinces over a four-month period (September to December 2005). In light of the short timeline required by UNICEF, we decided to focus our research on global education in Grades 4-6, years when the subject is often introduced within Canadian schools.

This report presents the findings from our research, and uses these findings to address two important questions:

■ What is the current state of global education inside Canadian elementary schools, and how is this being supported by schools, districts and provincial ministries, as well as by non-governmental (NGO) partners?

■ How can Canadian organizations (including UNICEF) better encourage and support global education in Canadian schools?

Our answers to these questions are tentative – a study conducted on such a short timeline could never be more than exploratory. Nonetheless, we believe this report will be a useful baseline for understanding how policy and administrative settings at the provincial, district and school levels shape the delivery of global education in Canadian schools. The report will also provide a sample of the challenges that teachers and education administrators describe that affect their implementation of global education, across a wide range of school contexts.

Two things are clear from our research. First, there has never been a better time to pay attention to global education in Canadian schools; at the federal, provincial, district and school levels, there is wide recognition of the importance of global education. However, there are also many barriers to the effective implementation of global education. Tackling these challenges will require more than an improvement in the initiatives of individual organizations; they need the coordinated attention of a range of actors, both from within and beyond ministries of education.

For this reason, we hope that this study will stimulate much-needed debate about how to integrate and coordinate the many global education activities currently being sponsored by development NGOs, teachers’ organizations, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and provincial ministries of education in Canada.
Defining Global Education

One of the central challenges we faced in designing this study was developing a definition of global education itself. What exactly were we studying? Although the term “global education” is widely used in educational circles and by international development organizations, it competes with other terms – such as “international development education,” or “world studies.” The term is often inflected with different values, meanings and expectations. Thus scholars sometime use the analogy of six blind men describing an elephant, with each man touching and emphasizing a different part or function of the elephant’s body.

We tackled this definitional problem in our study by focusing on how global education has been defined and constructed as a field of activity by Canadian and international organizations, scholars, and educators. In Chapter 2, we look at the evolution of global education as a field of curriculum development and educational practice, and reflect on current theoretical debates about what global education is, and is meant to accomplish. We also look at some of the recent empirical work that supports these understandings.

In Chapter 3, we describe how teaching about international and global issues has evolved in Canadian schools over a 40-year period, and look at some of the key actors that have driven this evolution. We also place the Canadian global education experience in a comparative perspective.

In subsequent chapters, we explore how contemporary educators, in the school and at district and provincial levels, define and enact a global education curriculum within Canadian elementary schools. What activities, programs or initiatives do they include when asked to describe global and international development education in their schools? What issues or types of activities are prioritized, and which are neglected? In answering these questions, our informants provide insight into the “lived” definitions of global education in Canada’s diverse schools.

The Research Design

This research explores the current practice of global education in Grades 4-6 in six of Canada’s 14 provinces and territories. Our goal is to provide a “snapshot” of the range of efforts and challenges experienced within schools, as well as an overview of the organizational and policy supports provided by district and provincial educational administrations in each provincial jurisdiction. We also documented external resources and partnerships for global education at each of these levels.

Initially, research was planned around a small sample of districts and schools in British Columbia (BC), Yukon, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia. We selected these provinces and territories to provide a cross-section of regional experiences from western, central, eastern and northern Canada. However, a strike by BC teachers impeded completion of the BC provincial case, leaving us with five complete provincial cases, one case from a territory, and one partial provincial case derived only from provincial-level data.

For each of our provincial and territorial case studies, we began with the ministry of education, reviewing existing curricular guidelines for global or international themes, and interviewing one or more ministry officials identified as having some responsibility for the implementation of global education. (Where no such person could be identified, we interviewed someone responsible for a related curricular topic such as social studies or social justice.)

We then began the process of recruiting a small number of districts and schools in each province to participate in the study. An initial short list of districts was created which included any district of average
size within the province. We then looked for districts that could give us research permissions within our narrow time requirements. A total of eight districts across the five provinces ultimately agreed to participate in the study. These were predominantly urban, English-speaking public school districts, although in two provinces we purposively sought the participation of two rural school boards, and in one province included a Catholic school board. All interviews in Quebec were conducted in French.

At the district level, we again interviewed at least one official responsible for global education or related curricular topics. We asked these officials to recommend schools from a short list of ten that appeared to be of typical size for that district, and to identify any schools that may be particularly active in global education. We recruited participation from the resulting short list of schools.

In total, 15 schools across the six provincial/territorial sites were included in our study (two schools per district with one exception). The schools included eight urban English-speaking public schools, four rural public schools, two urban Catholic schools and one French-speaking urban public school. The scope of a school's participation in the study varied enormously; in some, only the principal and one teacher agreed to be interviewed; in others, groups of teachers assembled for focus group discussions. Across the 15 schools that participated in this study, we interviewed a total of 14 administrators ( principals or vice principals) and 38 teachers and school staff. We asked these educators to tell us about the formal and informal teaching of global education in their schools, and to reflect on the challenges they faced in delivering global education curricula.

In addition, we had the opportunity to interview two individuals outside of the formal sampling design. The first was a principal at an urban elementary school in Ontario that offers a holistic global education program. The second was a teacher who had been previously involved in a “global education network” in an urban area in Alberta.
Throughout this study, the identities of specific districts, schools, and teachers have been disguised. We did not intend our data to be used to evaluate their individual performances, but rather as an aid in developing a baseline profile of how provinces, districts and schools work together to create formal and informal opportunities for Grades 4-6 students to engage in global education and international development issues.

In analyzing the data we collected in each province, we sought first to understand how teaching about global and international issues is formulated and supported. We looked at how the formal policies and supports provided by provincial ministries of education are translated into actual practices within schools. We also documented other sources of support and information that affect school-level practices. In each province we tried to uncover mismatches or tensions within conceptions of global education at three key levels of implementation: provincial, district and school. We asked informants to describe the kinds of non-governmental resources and partnerships that informed their global education activities, and to tell us how these resources and partnerships could be improved.

We also sought – quite cautiously given the variations and small size of our provincial samples – to compare these provincial experiences by looking for similarities and differences in the way that global education is defined, supported and enacted at each level of implementation across the six provinces.
Overview

This report provides a preliminary description of the landscape of global education in Canada, documenting how global education is formulated in policies and curricula at the provincial level, supported by districts, and enacted in Canadian schools.

As described above, Chapter 2 highlights some of the debates that animate contemporary scholarship on global education, and reviews recent research. Chapter 3 explores some of the structural features of Canadian society, its political system and educational institutions, and the way that these have contributed to a uniquely Canadian experience in global education. Here we also look at the present configuration of actors engaged in global education activities, and place the Canadian experience in comparative perspective.

Six subsequent chapters provide a brief case study of the global education experience in a single province or territory at the three levels of implementation (provincial, district, school). Chapter 10 provides province-level data from British Columbia.

In Chapter 11, we summarize the findings from our seven cases, and explore variations and similarities across them. We relate our findings to recent research on global education in other contexts, asking how the Canadian experience compares. We also question how the “lived definitions” of global education that we found in Canadian schools can be mapped to contemporary normative debates about global education in the scholarly and research literatures. Finally, we present a series of recommendations. Among these are our thoughts on the need for further research on global education in Canada.

ENDNOTES:

1 We use the term “elementary” throughout the report to refer to education starting in kindergarten and encompassing grades before secondary school, although provinces and countries may use the terms “primary” and “elementary” interchangeably or define the grades they comprise differently. For example, the Ontario curriculum defines “primary” as Grades 1-3 and “junior” as Grades 4-6; whereas BC generally refers to “elementary” as from kindergarten to Grade 7.

2 The Yukon has only one district school board, and therefore we consider the two interviews completed with department of education staff as equivalent to both provincial and district levels combined.

3 Hereafter we use the term provincial to include both provincial and territorial sites.

4 Rotating teachers’ strikes in Quebec made it impossible to complete two school sites in any district.

5 In the English-speaking school sample, there were two French immersion schools and one dual-track French and English school. In one urban and one rural public school, there was a sizable minority of First Nations students.

6 This is the Scholastic Arts Global Education (SAGE) Programme. Emphasizing diversity, the environment and an exploration of the arts. SAGE aims to foster in young people a strong sense of social responsibility and active citizenship.