I would like to begin with a thank you to Terezia Zoric for organizing this panel and a thank you to the great teams of volunteers who have worked with her on this conference on educational activism year after year. All those who have organized a conference know how much invisible work is behind all the sessions that we will enjoy today. It is very nice to see the OISE auditorium packed with educators on a Saturday at 8.30 am to discuss issues of activism and social justice, especially considering that we are at the end of the academic year and everybody is busy completing final assignments. Thank you to all conference participants for coming today!

I was asked to talk for a few minutes about my understanding of activism, and to make some connections to the world of education. My understanding of activism is straightforward. For me, activism is any intentional action, individual or collective, to make a better world. By a better world I mean a world where all human beings can develop their full potential, a world that is more democratic, just, peaceful, sustainable and enjoyable than the world that we have today. I am aware that there is another type of activism, one that moves in the opposite direction, that is, towards a world characterized by more unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities, violence, oppressive relations, war, poverty, pollution, discrimination, and so forth. In these remarks, I am only going to talk about the first type of activism, which for the sake of better labels we can call life-oriented activism or social justice-oriented activism or activism for democracy. It is not that I ignore the existence of the activism of those who pursue an anti-democratic agenda, but that is a topic for another conversation. In this conversation, I want to make a few remarks about activism oriented to make this a better world.

The first remark I would like to make is that when the word ‘activism’ is invoked, the most common image that comes to mind is that of protests, demonstrations, riots, picket lines, strikes, tear gas, civil disobedience, confrontations between
militants and police, people being arrested, and the like. This is indeed a significant facet of activism, and it is true that many gains in the history of humanity were achieved through the courageous struggles of oppressed peoples against the power of the day fighting for freedom, equality and dignity, from Spartacus to Gandhi, and here in North America we can think of Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Mother Jones, Emily Murphy, the Suffragettes, J.S. Woodsworth and Bob Hunter, among many others.

However, there are other types of activism that are also important and can also make a big difference in changing policies and practices, or in improving the concrete situations of real people. I am thinking, for instance, about the more quiet activism that is involved in writing letters to change a bad policy or in signing petitions to release a political prisoner. I am thinking about the activism of doing rigorous environmental research to support the legal case of a community affected by pollution. I am thinking about the day-to-day activism of engaged citizens who promote community development and food banks in areas with high levels of poverty and crime. I am thinking about a group of committed youth that produce a monthly publication to raise awareness about an issue, or go door to door to garner support for a worthy cause. I am thinking about volunteers who put in many hours of work during electoral campaigns or who organize regular neighbourhood cleanups or community gardens. I am thinking about students, teachers and principals who undertake initiatives to democratize their schools. I could continue with many other examples, but I hope I made my point, which is that activism comes in many different shapes and forms; it can be about opposing something but also about creating something new; it can be about changing policies, practices or particular situations; it can be about local, national or global issues; it can take place within or without institutions. Regardless of the different types and scopes of activism, a common feature is that often these are activities that we do beyond what is expected from us in our daily lives; activism is something that we do because we believe in the goodness of the cause, usually on a volunteer basis. In my view, activism is about good work done by decent people to make this a better world.

Activism is often political, in the good sense of the word. I am using here the term ‘political’ in its broad sense. Indeed, political comes from the Greek word politicos, which means that which concerns, in one way or another, life in the city (polis), or life in the public sphere, or life with and together with others. In this sense, we are all political given that we are, in one way or another, in relationships with others and with the public.
One of the main tasks of political activism is to eliminate discrimination and injustice. More than that: it is a responsibility of all Canadian citizens. To be more specific, it is one the six duties of a Canadian citizen explicitly stated by the Canadian government. According to the Canadian Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, Canadians have six main citizenship responsibilities:

1. to vote in elections
2. to help others in the community
3. to care for and protect our heritage and environment
4. to obey Canada’s laws
5. to express opinions freely while respecting the rights and freedoms of others
6. to eliminate discrimination and injustice

So, duty number 6 calls for engaging in political activism to eliminate discrimination and injustice. The message of duty number 6 is loud and clear. We are not asked only to reduce discrimination and injustice, but to eliminate them. This a civic and legal duty, but it is also a moral duty for all of us who believe that we can do something to make this a better world, as it is a moral duty to contribute to improve democracy, peace and the environment in our planet. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, the distribution of wealth in this planet is highly inequitable, wars continue to kill thousands of lives every year and waste substantial resources that could be used for human development, and climate change has the potential to dramatically alter our physical reality in catastrophic ways. As Seneca noted, it is not because things are dangerous that we do not dare: it is because we do not dare that things are dangerous.

To make a final point that relates directly to the main topic of this conference, I would like to highlight the distinction between education in activism, on the one hand, and activism in education, on the other.

Education in activism has to do with the role of education in supporting activism. Although this is seldom recognized, education has played an important role in supporting many social movements around the world.
One case in point is the role played by the extension department of St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia in the development and expansion of the co-operative movement in the Antigonish region and beyond. Another example was the role of Highlander, an educational centre based in Tennessee, in supporting the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1950s. By the way, the myth says that Rosa Parks was tired when she did not give her seat in that bus in 1955, but the truth is that Rosa Parks has attended the Citizenship School of Highlander a few months before, and she pointed out that the latter had a great impact on the former. In Latin America, Freirean-inspired popular education has played a key role in supporting a great variety of social and indigenous movements and in developing more participatory and democratic processes in rural and urban communities. So, to summarize, education in activism has to do with the educational dimension of social movements, that is, with the role of education as a tool for capacity building among participants of social movements.

Education in activism is different than activism in education. Whereas education in activism is about the contribution of education to activism, activism in education is about the contribution of activism to education. Indeed, activism in education has to do with the activism oriented to change things in the educational system, from organizing global campaigns for the universal right to education to participating in a school council, from influencing changes in educational policies to proposing an anti-racist curriculum, from joining an equity committee in the board of education to working with an advocacy group to preserve an extracurricular program, from volunteering in an ecological initiative in a school to engaging students in an adult literacy campaign, from organizing an anti-bullying program to sparking a children’s participatory budgeting initiative. By the way, in Brazil they have been implementing participatory budgeting in elementary and secondary schools for several years; yes, children participate in democratic processes of deliberation and decision-making related to budget allocations and other matters that affect them, and it is interesting that they act in a very responsible way. In some Brazilian schools principals are elected by the school community, after they present their ideas for the school to teachers, parents and students. The community votes for a principal, but more importantly, they vote for the implementation of a particular vision and they commit themselves to support the project endorsed by the majority of the school community.
Here in Toronto, there are many issues that demand more activism in education, even before we talk about innovative initiatives to democratize educational institutions. Today there are very urgent matters that demand our attention, including the cutbacks to ESL programs, International Language programs and adult education, the high dropout rates among students from some ethnocultural communities and from low income neighbourhoods, the increasing reliance on fees to cover extracurricular activities and field trips, the implementation of equity policies, and so on and so forth.

My time is almost out now, so I will conclude with four quotes for reflection and inspiration:

Mahatma Gandhi: “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

Paulo Freire: "The future isn’t something hidden in a corner. The future is something we build in the present."

George Bernard Shaw: Some look at things that are, and ask why. I dream of things that never were and ask why not?

Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has".

The last quote suggests that we should do not underestimate our own possibilities to change the world. We can always make a difference. Sometimes we are able to make a big difference, sometimes we are able to make a small difference, but we should remember that small changes often have an expansive effect and can lead to larger transformations. Each small accomplishment in the road to a more democratic, just, peaceful and sustainable world is important and worth celebrating.

I wish you the best during the rest of this conference. Let’s enjoy our deliberations, and hopefully we bring many different ideas and perspectives to the conversations because, as the saying goes, when everybody thinks alike, nobody is thinking very much.

Thank you!