Good afternoon, and it’s an absolute pleasure for me to be a panelist for the Alberta Teacher’s Association on feminist leadership for the second time. My name is Joanne Cave and I am a grade 12 student at Salisbury Composite High School in Sherwood Park, Alberta. In addition, I am the founder and executive director of a non-profit organization called Ophelia’s Voice, which serves to engage girls and young women in a leadership capacity in their community. As a student I observed the unfortunate lack of any kind of feminist lens in the school curriculum – and as a self-proclaimed feminist at the age of 12, I felt this absence of discussion was disconcerting. Where would my peers - male and female - learn about the Famous Five, why there are fewer women than men in Canadian politics, or why Rosalind Franklin received less credit than her male counterparts for discovering DNA? I also wondered what it would take for me to feel comfortable labelling myself as such a “dirty word” to my peers and teachers. As would be the typical response of any 12 year old to these frustrations, I started a non-profit organization. Ophelia’s Voice was inspired by Mary Pipher’s book, Reviving Ophelia: Saving The Selves of Adolescent Girls – who used Hamlet’s Ophelia as a metaphor for today’s young women, who are significantly less confident and assertive, and more insecure with their identities and bodies.

Because school curriculums didn’t address issues like sexism, media literacy, or body image – I decided it was my responsibility to create an alternative venue for girls to engage in dialogue, build leadership skills, and find solidarity among other girls. I soon learned that my great idea sounded a lot easier than it was
to execute. I also learned a lot about ageism and tokenism as a young person. What I found most appalling was the opposition to and fear surrounding the topics we wished to discuss, the “f” word as well as the resulting stigmatization that came with it. Many community organizations we tried to partner with felt that, clearly, any discussion about sexuality would provoke girls to engage in the act itself. Or they felt that a then 14-year-old was not capable of facilitating a discussion with her peers – and if that discussion was about feminism, the idea of Ophelia’s Voice was simply ludicrous. In an abbreviated version of our colourful history as an organization it took us 2 years of being doubted and discouraged until we received our non-profit status. We launched our first group of girls in 2006 and since then we’ve reached over 400 girls across Alberta, garnered media attention from the Wall Street Journal and Canadian Press, and received over $20,000 worth of government grants. Just earlier this year we participated in a project with the United Nations Association in Canada, where Ophelia’s Voice presented the keynote at a policymakers’ roundtable and was invited to submit a statement on gender, youth engagement, and health to the Canadian Senate.

I was fortunate enough to have a very positive school experience during the process of launching Ophelia’s Voice. Ironically, the very institution that frustrated me was significantly supportive of my efforts. Until high school I attended a charter school in Sherwood Park with a strong focus on independent study and mentorship. The individual relationships I built with some of my elementary and junior high teachers still exist today because they encouraged me to discover my passion. The transition from a small, intimate charter school experience to a large, impersonal high school was a challenge, but I learned quickly who my allies were. Under the encouragement of my very supportive guidance counsellor last year, I decided to fast-track my high school courses in two years so I could devote my
final year of high school to learning outside the classroom walls – essentially, committing myself fully to Ophelia’s Voice without the obligation of attending classes.

The support I had in my schooling career to further my passion for activism is undeniable, but many of my experiences in the classroom did not sit well with me. Even fresh out of elementary school – without the level of understanding to articulate my discomfort – I remember being sexually harassed when teachers, administrators, and peers would make lewd comments. Too often I remember wanting to learn more as women’s contributions to history were glazed over in one token chapter of our textbook. Sex education was conveniently omitted from my entire school career until my grade 11 year – which, statistically, is quite after-the-fact for much of the student population. My sex education was not queer-positive, and the heterosexist information I did receive was very limited. The more I endured the lack of information and critical analysis in the classroom, the more my passion for introducing feminism to girls and young women increased.

What I do acknowledge is that “feminism” in its first and second wave forms has lost some relevance to girls and young women. Your fight for the right to vote or birth control is now our fight for comprehensive sex education and against the objectification of girls and women in media. I challenge you, as educators, to help rebrand feminism in a way that is accessible to your students and to recognize its many manifestations in conversations about equality, politics, history, media, oppression, and social justice. When feminist ideas are made relevant to young people – whether it be through a discussion about Sarah Palin or gender stereotypes in popular media like High School Musical – the traditional
stigmatization is removed and there is potential for feminism to be sustained in the next generation.

In my experience as a student, it’s very important to be conscious of gender stereotypes that you may be reinforcing subconsciously. I never understood why in Phys Ed 10 our female class did an entire unit on cheerleading – something our teacher felt would universally appeal to girls – while the male class spent that time learning more so-called masculine sports, like football or weight training. Just recently I was invited, on behalf of Ophelia’s Voice, to deliver a presentation for a Catholic school to 86 junior high aged girls on the topic of healthy relationships and boundaries. While I prepared the presentation, it occurred to me – if I were to address this topic in a heteronormative way as the school expected me to, we were missing half the equation. Boys. By offering this presentation only to girls, even with the best of intentions, it sent the message that girls exclusively were responsible for setting the boundaries and maintaining healthy relationships. At this age many students do not have the ability to think critically about the messages they are receiving because they have yet to been taught these skills. Without them the girls in my Phys Ed class and the girls listening to the relationships presentation begin to internalize these dangerous stereotypes.

As an educator, it’s important when integrating feminist practice into the classroom to not make the discussions about women and other marginalized groups a distinct section in isolation. A feminist or anti-oppression lens needs to be applied fluidly and consistently for the concepts to cement within your students. It is also important to not address social justice issues shallowly by simply acknowledging their presence. The impact for students will come when the systemic issues behind these injustices are explored - when our patriarchal society
is attributed with our present state of gender inequality and power dynamics influences all varieties of oppression.

In closing, I will share with you some of the best practices I’ve encountered as a student and as the leader of a feminist organization. The common thread in these best practices is the element of mentorship and the value of creating intergenerational spaces – the impact of both of these is enormous. Dialogue about social justice and feminism is a start, but when you can provide the mechanisms for the students to initiate their own social change, such as the support of a mentor – that is equipping them with valuable lifelong leadership skills. The first example of young Canadian feminist activism that I love to share is an Ontario-based organization called the Miss G_ Project – a group of university women’s studies students that wanted to see a women’s & gender studies course implemented provincially at the high school level. After a struggle that ended in a day-long phone-in to the Ministry of Education, in which they had to disconnect their phone line, I’m pleased to announce that Miss G_ will see tangible results of their efforts when a women’s & gender studies course is implemented Ontario-wide in 2010. Secondly, and more close to home, the Calgary Girl’s School is doing some highly innovative media literacy initiatives with their female students by encouraging them to write to plastic surgeons, advertising executives, and models about the negative self-image they reinforce to young girls. Whether these efforts are on a large or small scale, their potential impact to raise critical thinking skills and consciousness in students is immense. What is important to note, however, is the importance of including boys in dialogue about feminism and oppression – like the relationships presentation, you can’t initiate meaningful change with only half the population. As the facilitator of a girl-focused program, I do recognize the value in gender-specific dialogue that is not exclusive.
Educators are very influential in young people’s lives – you have enormous capacity to affect social change by impacting how your students apply critical thinking and an anti-oppression lens to their daily lives. With this influence also comes a lot of responsibility – with the conversations you initiate in your classroom, maybe you can empower a female student to call out sexual harassment when she sees it, unlike my 13 year old self. Or maybe you can help the questioning student feel like they belong in a queer-positive environment. The ramifications of these efforts are immeasurable. To begin with, integrate a feminist and anti-oppression lens to everyday discussions, whether they are part of a history or science or English class. Perhaps during a history class about the interactions between First Nations and colonizers, share how many Aboriginal cultures are matriarchal in nature and how that differs from our present society. Perhaps in science class, initiate a discussion about how sexism impeded the recognition of many female scientists and their accomplishments. By raising this level of consciousness among students, you are helping them flex their abilities to think critically so that social justice isn’t just a classroom discussion – it’s a perspective.

While many young people my age are eager to graduate and leave behind their high school classroom forever, the more I recognize how much impact educators can have, the more I consider education as a potential career path for myself. There is no other profession that gives you the ability to cultivate seeds of passion, justice, critical thinking, and lifelong learning for the next generation so they can advocate for social justice and create change. It is up to you to use this
opportunity to empower, support, and inspire – and for the sake of our girls, the future of feminism, and equality, I hope that you will.