The Director of Education plays a key role in educational leadership in the First Nations on-reserve, band-operated schools in Manitoba, yet there is a scarcity of research related to the nature of their work. Very little attention has been given to identifying the knowledge and skills required to do an effective job in advancing high quality education for First Nations students. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to examine the nature of the work of First Nations Directors of Education working or who have worked recently in First Nations band-operated school systems. The study explored selected aspects of their experiences, perspectives, preparation and training. The study involved interviewing twelve First Nations Directors of Education. The participants in this study were asked, in semi-structured in depth interviews, to define their role as Directors of Education, their preparation for the role, and what constitutes effective leadership in a First Nations context.

Education for First Nations must be understood within the historical context which saw the cultural, linguistic and traditional knowledge of First Nations people undermined and devalued by the dominant society. The conditions that exist for First Nations are a result of First Nations people having been disadvantaged in a multitude of ways by colonization and nowhere more so than in the education system because the structure of formal schooling has as its foundation colonial institutions (Battiste, 2013). As such, this research utilizes a postcolonial theoretical framework.

It is important that attention is given to an improved way of educating if First Nations are going to have a chance of developing effective schools and if there is going to be a realization of
aspirations and fulfillment of the goals that First Nations have long had for education of their children. The problems and challenges related to First Nations education are complex. It will take some time and rethinking of how we “do” education for First Nations. This study is significant because it provides some insight about leadership in the First Nations communities in which the participants work. It provides empirical data on the challenges and issues associated with the on-reserve education systems which can inform potential solutions and strategies to address them and provide a better understanding of why our educational systems are failing our students.

The study found that the role of the First Nations Director of Education is multi-faceted and complex. The roles and responsibilities that the participants identified were categorized using Cuban’s (1988) typology of managerial, political and instructional. The results of the study show that the focus of the work of the Director of Education is on the managerial and political which is not surprising considering the context in which they work. Their work is influenced by many factors including underfunding, lack of resources, high teacher turnover and the on-going impacts of the residential schools and colonialism. The study identified the need for specific training and provides recommendations for practice and future research.