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**Title/Título:** The front office as frontier territory: A lens on the socio-spatial construction of parent-school relations

**Topic:** Parents-teachers mutual obligations and different dimensions of partnerships

Obligaciones mutuas entre padres y profesores y educadores, y las distintas dimensiones en que se establecen sus relaciones

**Presentation time/Día de presentación:** Session in English. Thursday 15, 12:15-1:45 p.m. Room 2, Third Floor

Sesión en Inglés. Jueves 15, 12:15-1:45 p.m. Sala 2, Tercer Piso

### **Abstract**

While school front offices are often mentioned, usually negatively, in research on schools and parents, there is almost no detailed research that looks at what actually happens in them. In this paper we report on a small-scale commissioned research project which began to fill this gap<sup>4</sup>. Six primary and four secondary schools considered to have ‘good practice’ in school-community relations were investigated using a corpus of methods viz logging of all queries and responses on two separate weeks, interviews with senior school administrators and office staff, observation and photographic recording in the office, conversations with parents, and analysis of key school documents. In these particular schools the vast majority of queries were about routine matters such as illness, payment of money, scheduled events and who to speak to. Our data revealed no incidences of ‘the angry parent’ even though she/he was dominant in interview discussion. In seeking to re-read our data and push further on analysis, we have come to think that the office operated as a kind of frontier space between the privatised school world and the ‘outside’. What happened in this space was produced out of a complex mix of: the physical and aesthetic construction of the material environment; the hierarchical and gendered organization of school staff work; the school’s communication and textual practices; the positioning of the school within the neighbourhood and market; the cultural biases of government policy; and the general and local narratives about parent-school relations and front office work. We suggest that some schools in our sample point to the ways in which the office might be a frontier space that is more porous and in which interactions with parents are less regulated, more convivial and more ‘public’.

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<sup>4</sup> Pat Thomson, Linda Ellison, Tina Byrom and Donna Bulman (2004) *An investigation of queries that school offices receive from parents/carers* (DfES: UK) (The final report is available on <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR575.pdf>)