

# The teachers strike: the perspective of parents in rural and urban communities of chiapas

Prof. Angelica Arroyo Josefina Bravo  
Prof. Fanni Lisset Ralda Zuniga  
Mtra. Lizbeth Nayeli Garcia Infanzón

## **About the Autors**

Masters in Psychology from the  
University Pablo Guardado Chavez.  
E-mail [maestraspsicopedagogia@hotmail.com](mailto:maestraspsicopedagogia@hotmail.com)

## Abstract

The research analyzes the perceptions that parents of rural and urban communities have about the teachers movement around in 2013 in the city of Tuxtla Guitierrez, Chiapas. The study was conducted from a qualitative, phenomenological approach, using individual interviews and analyzing information in a descriptive and interpretive manner. Four analytical metacategories are constructed: Demands of the teachers, which states that parents have little knowledge of what teachers are demanding during the strike. What they refer to is that teachers are afraid of being fired; response from the authorities, who express dissatisfaction with the way the authorities have handled the situation, giving salaries to teachers who don't give classes; Consequences of the teachers strike in expressing dissatisfaction, because they are affected by the loss of classes, and the economy which was affected in their work by roadblocks; and the proposal of the parents, in which different opinions were given such as supporting their children with homework, changing them to private schools or requesting courses or workshops to sensitize the teachers.

*Keywords: Teachers' movement, social representations, Parents, Community, Education Reform.*

## Introduction

The teachers' movement in Chiapas in 2013 had consequences indefinite establishment of teachers in the main streets of the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, affecting students in school performance, as well as businesses that are located around the area where the camps were established. Within three months of work stoppage covering August, September and October at the state level striking against education reform, there are many conflicting opinions by government authorities, politicians, businessmen and representatives of various social movements about this event.

This investigation is seeking to understand the views of parents in both rural and urban communities as to the situation that occurred in the state of Chiapas with respect to the suspension of classes.

In this sense, what do you think the parents opinion is with respect to this teachers movement? and more: what is the social perception of a parent in a rural community and urban environment?

The principal subjects participating in this research are the parents of these two types of communities, due to the difference of opinions or viewpoints that may be contradictory, or alternatively, have an integrative opinion about what the citizens of Chiapas are facing today.

The teachers' movement has had a strong presence in the last thirty years. In 1979 teachers came together and started a battle and it was "the intention and desire to regain a social role threatened which was perceived by modernization" (Street, 1995: 75). In addition, two events were part of the demands, "one is the signature and implementation of the Alliance for Quality Education (ACE), the other is the claim to end the normal ( teachers) school."

The most recent action prior to the current teachers' movement, occurred between August 18 to November 6th of 2008, and the teachers at different levels reported a general strike against the ACE considering that "is a reform that promotes a rigorous, competitive system of recruitment of teachers"(Zafra, 2008: 7)

Throughout the twentieth century, teaching has been involved in the greatest struggle for labor rights, "cancellation of the ACE Certification, rejection of sectional and national leaderships of the SNTE" (González, 2009 major movements: 83 ); and evaluation, for having discovered the deception of these transformations being masked by the privatization policy of the government (Gonzalez, 2009). The last of the movements that had a major impact was in 2008, which protested against the law of ISSSTE and the realization of democratic sectional centers (Gonzalez, 2009), with different states involved such as : Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero and Michoacan. In this same movement the plan of the struggle was presented as boycotting the beginning of the school year, adding parents to the movement, and make a megamarch before the disinterest of the government.

For many years , teachers maintained that their struggle for their job would not be boycotted by the new laws that are constantly implemented, as Zorrilla and Beard have pointed out (2008: 2): "in the last decade of the twentieth century, systems of education of most Latin American countries initiated complex reform processes which are characterized by the transformation of management and the major renovation in the pedagogic field."

Education reform in Mexico originated in 1992, and was created to complement and stimulate the educational initiative of the states

and municipalities and thereby combat educational lag (Zorrilla and Bonifas, 2008).

At present, they have conducted a statewide strike against the implementation of educational reform in Mexico, issued in the Official Gazette on September 11th, 2013.

## Theoretical Perspective

We will describe a theoretical approach that will help us understand why this movement developed and we enter each of the aspects that we considered relevant to the topic. The theory of social representations was considered for understanding this phenomenon.

Social representations, according to Moscovici (Materan, 2008: 2) "is an act of thought in which the subject relates to an object and that object through various mechanisms is replaced by a symbol. This is how the object is represented symbolically in the subject's mind." León (2002: 362) defines social representations as:

"cognitive systems with a logic and its own language (...) that do not represent mere opinions, images or attitudes in relation to an object, but theories and areas of knowledge for the discovery and organization of reality (...) a system of values, ideas and practices with a dual function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orientate in a material and social world and master it; and second, allow communication between members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and for naming and classifying, unambiguously, aspects of their world and their individual and group history."

Representations are specific ways to understand and communicate reality and are determined by their interactions. "Social representations allow building discourses on how we understand social phenomena in our environment" (Diaz, 2005: 4). These ways of thinking and creating social reality are made up of symbolic elements as they are not only ways to acquire and reproduce knowledge but have the ability to make sense of social reality.

Social representations are produced by the experience of everyday life, through common sense; for example, social representations can be developed for situations involving people, such as diseases, life stages such as adolescence, the teachers' movement, etc..

For Leon (2002) social representations serve different functions, including: make objects , people and events found in everyday life conventional; giving them a final shape, locating them in a category and set them as a model of a certain kind, which is distinct and shared by a group of people; in other words, convert a strange reality into a familiar reality; facilitate communication between people-communication that involves sharing many views on various diverse issues; promote collective thinking and reflexivity of groups with these being fundamental requirements for what is called social identity; in other words, knowledge of the group to which it belongs; justify decisions and behaviors that occur in social interactions.

Two are the processes through which social representations are generated. The first is defined as objectification, which is to transform something abstract into something concrete and material- products of thought into physical realities, concepts and images.

The second process is defined as anchoring and is a categorization process, by which we classify and give a name to things and people. This process transforms the unknown into a recognizable system, provides ownership, and creates familiar categories. These mechanisms through which social representations are formed serve to define social groups that guide their action, as well as explain how the social transforms the representation of knowledge and how this representation transforms the social (Materán, 2008).

Therefore, we will now attempt to compare the social representations of parents in rural communities and urban settings regarding the teachers' movement in Chiapas.

## Methodology and subjects

The type of research developed in this investigation is qualitative, so it is possible to know the perspective that parents have regarding the teachers' movement. Qualitative research "aims to analyze specific cases in their temporary and local particularity from the expressions and activities of people in their local contexts. Therefore, qualitative research is in a position to design ways for psychology and the social sciences in the trends mentioned Toulmin- transforming them into research programs and maintain the necessary flexibility of its objects and tasks" (Flick, 2007, p 27).

The method that was used is phenomenological. According to Taylor and Bogdan (1982: 16) this method “wants to understand social phenomena from the actor’s perspective and examines the way in which the world is experienced.” Furthermore it is stated that “a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the experiences of an individual or group of individuals about a concept or phenomenon”, with the main objective to “discover what underlies the ways through which conventionally people describe their experience from the structures that they are made of.”(Sandin, 2003: 151)

## Technique

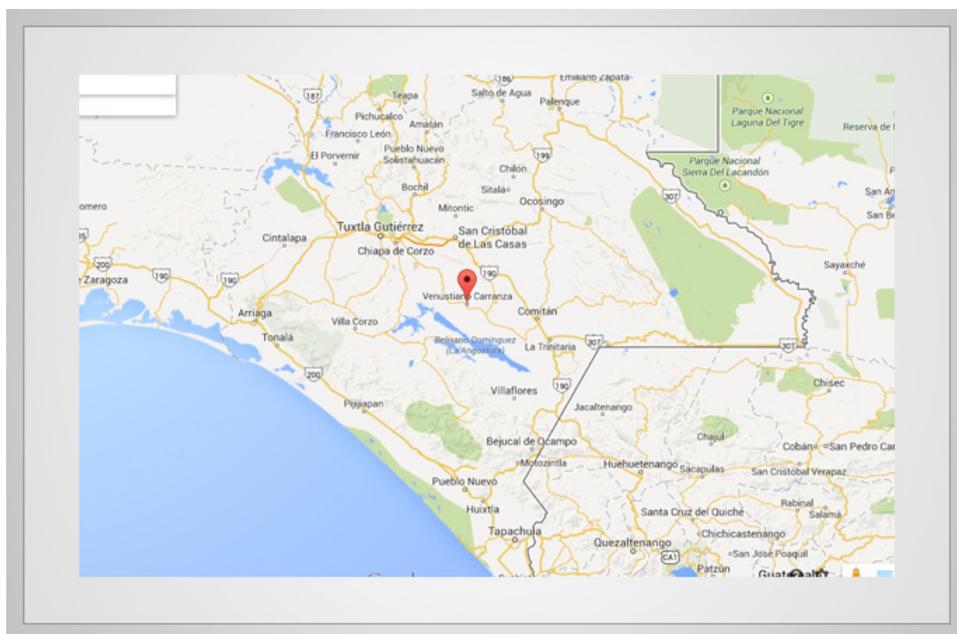
Interviews were conducted with parents who have children studying in schools that are included in the teachers’ strike from the colony of Miguel Hidalgo, municipality of Venustiano Carranza and the City of Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

Interviews are a form of interpersonal communication that seek to provide or receive information, and under which certain decisions (Arias, 1976) are taken. This technique was aimed at obtaining personalized information orally about the aspects of the events that shape were studied.

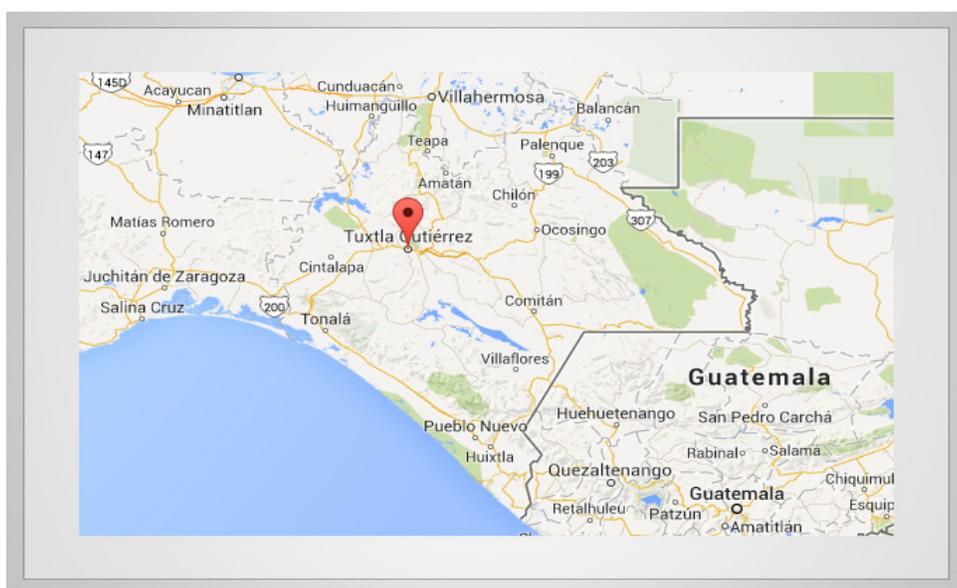
## Subjects and context

In order to carry out the investigation parents of two communities were interviewed. Five from the colony of Miguel Hidalgo and the municipality of Venustiano Carranza and five from the city of Gutierrez, Chiapas, who have children studying in schools that participated in the teachers strike.

Miguel Hidalgo is a community consisting of 1,178 inhabitants (INEGI, 2013) . Their main source of income is agriculture. It has basic services like water, electricity, health, and education different levels of which two are preschool, one primary school, and a high school (Telesecundaria); It currently also has a presence of higher education with the creation of a campus of the University of Science and Arts of Chiapas. The five parents interviewed perform different jobs such as housekeepers, construction workers, musicians and nursing.



*Figura 1. Google Maps: Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas, México.*



*Figura 1. Google Maps: Venustiano Carranza, Chiapas, México.*

Tuxtla Gutiérrez is the capital of the homonymous municipality and capital of the Mexican state of Chiapas. It is an urbanized city and has approximately 553 374 inhabitants (INEGI, 2013). Its growth and economic development has accelerated since the administrative centralization of government, the arrival of domestic and foreign capital investment brought to the city and increasing state economic development aid. The

five parents who were interviewed have their children in public schools, three of which belong to a middle class socioeconomic level, two are from a lower economic level. Those interviewed work as custodial staff, businessman, secretary and lawyers.

## Subjects and context

Data analysis is a thought process that enables the systematic review of information, identification of parts, relations between them and the whole, as a tool in the discovery of cultural meanings. The information is linked to the problem under study, the way in which the problem is approached and the strategies used to understand it.

The following procedure is based on the contributions of Taylor and Bogdan, Woods, Goetz and LeCompte, and includes two sections:

- a. The method used for exploring the field of study. This follows the path of emerging themes and concepts or propositions are developed to make sense of them. Questions are redefined, working on monitoring the statements that are given. Negative cases, access to other paths or the persecution of intuition is sought.
- b. Procedures used after exploring the field of study.
  - The first is the discovery in progress which integrates aspects, meanings, feelings of the researcher, classification schemes, concepts and theoretical propositions.
  - The second is the encoding of data and refinement of the understanding of the subject matter. This involves dividing the corpus of data, generating units and categories according to certain affinities. It is necessary to code field notes, transcripts, and documents-writing alongside each drive letter or number assigned to each category. Once done, it passes to the separation of the data according to thematic criteria. To do this, the author proposes to create three files, with folders and envelopes, to deposit the various categories and subcategories. This allows you to review the content, check their representativeness, comparisons, perform

triangulations, discard issues and build hierarchies among elements.

- The third is the relativization of the data. The data is placed in the context in which they were collected. It is necessary to analyze whether they were or not requested by the investigator if there are direct or indirect data (Montoya, 1997).

The resulting report is descriptive and interpretive. The situation studied is presented in its entirety, bringing together the different perspectives of the participants and establishing connections between the different aspects that make up reality.

## Results

Starting from individual interviews done on different days in the month of November 2013, in the rural community Miguel Hidalgo, Venustiano Carranza and the urban area of the city of Tuxtla Gutierrez, 5 interviews were conducted in rural and 5 more in urban areas with people of different social status. Four analytical metacategories were developed, and were: Teachers demands, response of the authorities, consequences of the teachers' strike and proposals from parents.

The following describes each of these from the perspective of parents in different communities.

## Teachers demands

In rural areas it was found that parents knew little about the demands of the teachers, having vague ideas of what was being requested from the appropriate authorities, or simply they just knew the information teachers have been giving at some meetings but without any source to confirm the data, such as the privatization of education and some benefits to teachers such as tenure. They demonstrated anger about the little or no information that the teachers shared with them, understanding the current situation superficially and thus waiting to have a solution and that their children can return to school normally.

“Those who told us something said that is about...the privatization of education and that we will have to pay, teachers have commented at the meetings that we have had and about the, the things that are going to be taken away, what is tenure and all that (E, S2, 22/11/2013)”

In Tuxtla Gutierrez parents also had little knowledge about the teachers demands, and the only thing that they knew was that they would lose their seniority rights as workers in education, which will be evaluated by the application of an exam and if they did not pass they would be fired and that they demand that the law is repealed. In either of the two communities, there is not much difference about what is known of this situation, as teachers and authorities have not released to parents the real reasons that were on strike and the demands placed on the authorities.

“What they demand, is that they do not agree or to my knowledge this is the reforms, they want to evaluate them and it’s useless because they all are constantly evaluating, but I do not know what they are afraid of, maybe they will see many people fired for failing the exam ... and the positions and everything will practically go to the garbage (E, S2, 14/11/013)”

“They do not want to be examined, they are afraid to be fired, uh, they want to totally like, the, uh, the, this, repeal of the law, and this, they don’t want to lose their rights. (E, S4, 14/11/013)”

In this regard the General Education Act, enacted that “it is for the Institute to assess the quality, performance and results of the national education system of secondary education at the preschool, elementary, and high school levels” (art. 3, fracc. Reformed IX, 2013).

## Authorities’ Response

Under this metacategory parents in rural areas were deeply unaware of the response of the authorities, which was based solely on the comments heard in the media such as television, and they did not care whether a solution was reached with authorities but that students could return to take classes at the earliest opportunity on a regular basis. Most of the answers indicated that they did not know about information that was given to them by the authorities, who assumed that the answers that they received did not benefit them at all because all they wanted was that classes continued and that the education of their children was no longer paralyzed. They also added that they did not investigate the terms

in which teachers have been negotiating with the authorities.

“As far as I heard on the news, supposedly at least in the government of the state has already given, this, is supposedly the problem is already solved that they had with the state teachers, and on Monday supposedly classes begin, now if they gave an answer to all of their requests, the truth, and they just told the kids return to school, but that, no, I have not paid attention or asked because the truth is then, to us personally, it does not benefit us at all, that is, not for me, that is good, good, I say that if they are going to pay teachers, they will go to school and ... (E, S5, 2013).”

In contrast, in the urban areas a little more was known of the response of the authorities, as there was no going back on the implementation of the reform and the authorities had proposed dialogue to negotiate some requests—regardless, the reform will continue. Some parents have felt attacked because the authorities have issued payments to teachers during the strike, and have expressed that the actions of the authorities are a joke and they do not understand how can without giving a single day of classes that the teachers were paid by the simple fact of not working. All these data that were obtained were heard in different versions from the other parents.

“Absolute negativity to their demands and to the very end all I could hear was that, that there could be added some other request but the reform was not going to change ... but it was another request to agree that this reform would stay as is without changes (E, S2, 14/11/013).”

“Well from what I’ve heard is that they are open to dialogue, at this moment, right now during these days they already sat down to talk, we have heard by the same people, the same teachers, that some were paid, this that, So I feel it is a travesty for the people, because if you are paying someone who is not working, that is not complying with their work, tell any of us who are working, if you miss one day, one day that you are late, they, they, they, they take away your, your money, so then why don’t they do that to them (E, S4, 14/11/013).”

## Consequences of teachers’ strike

There were multiple, direct or indirect, consequences of the teachers’ strike. Rural parents said that teachers told them that classes would be suspended for only 45 days, directly affecting students and businesses

that went bankrupt due to low sales of small businesses in the community. Unfortunately the situation with the teachers' movement not only affected students, but also different sectors of society such as traders, transporters, tourism, and society in general which complained about the activities that teachers made during the strike, such as positioning themselves of the roads connecting to the capital city, at gas stations and the marches that have continued to happen..

"In the children, we are, almost, they said 45 days they had not presented to school, they were late, they were delayed because they are falling behind. (...) "At least the shops, they say no, they have very few sales, or, since children are not going to class, there are no sales at the stationary stores (...) "Because sometimes we have been going to Tuxtla for shopping, and they blocked the roads, I mean, that is what you can say is affecting us, because its so much, that is, they know that they have their right to request and everything, but we as people also have rights (E, S5, 22/11/2013)."

In contrast, in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez consequences have been greater, since teachers have been manifesting indefinitely in the center of the city, affecting students with the loss of classes. Parents expressed their disagreement because they do not agree that their children return to school and that they are forced to regain the level of their studies and not lose the school year. They believed that the school year was lost. Businesses that are near the center of the city were also affected, so that total losses have forced shops to close further affecting citizens. The daily traffic happens on every street, corner to corner. One is unable to get out of a traffic jams for hours, affecting daily activities.

"Children lose their education level and it is not the same as if they stop studying for a long time and trying to get back into momentum and forcing the children is not the same (E, S1, 22/11/2013)."

"Yes, I have had to wait for the damn traffic, forgive me if I say this, because the teachers are making a march, I'm not, I say again I am not against that they make their, this, their fight or whatever you want to call it (E, S3, 22/11/2013)."

" It has brought us problems, this, the, from, the traffic that you cannot be, in the city, in, in the center of town, this, then, the, um, we live near the center where this is happening, there is no where to park, there is no where to go, you want to run errands downtown to pay, a, at the post office, you can walk on the sidewalks, you realize also that not only to me, directly, in addition, , we said our children no, but also for

several companies that believe me that maybe they were just surviving and providing work and they have closed (E, S4, 22/11/2013)."

These manifestations by parents are known as social representations that allow the building of discourse on how we understand social phenomena in our environment (Diaz, 2005) and they have expressed their experiences and how they have been affected by the teachers' strike.

## Proposal for parents

During all of these problematic period that the parents in rural areas were going through, many shared proposals to improve the situation that their children, however, many were doubtful that something could be done to improve the situation. Some said that they felt afraid to propose something to the teachers, and preferred to avoid confrontation. Even through all of this period they decided to support their children by studying with them at home and leading activities as a in home solution to the teachers' strike. Other parents said that the solution would be to transfer their children from a public school to a private school but this decision would affect them economically, but in the end they could not keep waiting for the authorities or teachers to give in.

"I do not know, because as I was thinking right now, there are private schools, I would change my daughter to a private school, as they say if it's for the money, but she has to study. (...) "Well, this, this is the only solution I had because I cannot confront with a teacher, you come out for the worse, sometimes one wants to argue with them or not, as my husband says they talk too much, they don't even know what they are saying, it was the only solution that we had (E, S1, 22/11/2013)."

"In fact we what we are doing is really supporting my children in their work, their homework(sic) , and we are supporting my children in their work, their tasks, so that, that ehy continue, this, really studying with the little that we know ( , S2, 22/11/2013)."

In contrast the parents in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez consider their proposals or opinions would not help much to improve the current situation of education in Chiapas. They show little more than apathy and prefer not to say much about it since they consider that Mexico is a country that does not advance because there is too much rivalry and believe that everyone survives however they can, and that their opinion is of no use. Others propose to seek alternatives such as courses and workshops for

teachers and teach them to be more sensitive in their jobs. They say that the teacher's job is not easy, dealing with children of different cultures, ages, education- and even more facing too large of a class size that is possible to manage.

"Look ... what I do is not going to do any good ... not going to do any good because ... we live in a very strange society I think, nobody sees, us like, like crabs when someone leaves, when someone gets on top everyone tries to pull him down so that they don't succeed, this happens with everything, so what good is my opinion if in the end things just continue as always, remain the same." (...) "While the teachers do not change their opinion, while teachers do not change their mindset, believe me this is not going to advance (E, S3, 22/11/2013)."

"(...) The first thing I would ask the authorities, would be that they have the sensitivity to give, the people who come in new, new courses or workshops or lessons, I don't know what you would call them, those with a different mentality, who think, that it's the same, to be a teacher is a very difficult task, the teacher that faces the children, of, if, if we talk about preschool teachers, now there are teachers that face children of different cultures, different ways of thinking, different education, and they, they have to manage not only a child, have to manage about 20, 30 children ... (E, S4, 22/11/2013)."

Regarding these aspects, Process states that (2013) parents decided to encourage "extramural classes" and roadblocks in response to the movement of "folded arms" that starred teachers who were against the educational reform supported by the Congress. In Oaxaca, after nine days without classes due to the indefinite strike declared by section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), parents have taken 24 schools in 14 municipalities to give "extramural classes." Official reports state the taking of various schools and blockades by the parents which forced teachers to return to their workplaces and start the school year 2013-2014.

These mechanisms, which were formed by social representation, serve to define the social groups and at the same time guide their action. This also explains how society transforms an idea into a representation and how this representation transforms society. (Materan, 2008).

## Conclusions

From the interviews with parents of the two communities in Chiapas, we can conclude that they have very little information about the reasons why the teachers' strike happened. This can be due to many causes: the lack of information that is disclosed to the public by the teachers and authorities, the parents education level - in some cases illiteracy, lack of means of communication, and in the rural communities few have comprehensive, critical information. It was made clear that the only information they could get was rumored in the community, and were content with what they heard from family, friends and acquaintances. Most parents were dissatisfied with the teachers' strike for the loss of classes their children had at different educational levels. Their biggest concern was failure to reach an agreement with the authorities could result in the loss of the full school year. For some parents, these actions have led them to decide to take their children out of Public School and place them in private schools, although this implied an adjustment in their household economy.

However in the urban community it was perceived that parents had a more critical perspective on the situation, unlike rural areas. The only concern of parents in both communities was their children did not miss school. They thought that they could not do anything to improve the situation, felt that this move was purely political on part of the teachers and could not intervene. In this area parents not only care about the academic performance of their children but also for the economy of the capital of the state where teachers manifested. They complained about the multiple issues that affected the population such as the blocking of main streets, traffic, garbage everywhere, and the downturn in the economy of the parents who are downtown. In general, this teacher's movement has affected many sectors of society, directly and indirectly, and the only thing that the parents asked was that both teachers and the government authorities reach a peaceful settlement.

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