

## TO DISAPPEAR THE ESCUELAS NORMALES RURALES: *Political Anxieties, the Secretaría de Educación Pública, and Education Reform in Mexico in 1969*

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes a 1969 education reform in Mexico that resulted in the closure of 14 of the then 29 escuelas normales rurales (rural teacher-training colleges) and the annihilation of their internal student organizing structures. I argue that the reform was politically motivated and impelled by the anxieties produced by student politics in the Cold War era. I show also how the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) participated in the authoritarian surveillance of students during the presidency of Díaz Ordaz and in a long campaign to delegitimize the Federación de Estudiantes Campesinos Socialistas de México (FECSM), the federation that united the students from these schools.

**KEYWORDS:** Escuelas Normales Rurales, SEP, Education Reform, Cold War, Mexico

In 1969, Mexico's Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) carried out a large-scale education reform that restructured rural teacher-training colleges (the *escuelas normales rurales*, or *normales rurales*). The reform slashed the number of available campuses in half and removed secondary-level instruction from the schools.<sup>1</sup> Most of the students, the *normalistas rurales* who experienced the reform, perceived it as a punishment or attack. Gabino, a student at the Escuela Normal Rural Ramos Millán (Roque) in the state of Guanajuato, who was forced to switch campuses because of the reform, believed that, "It was Díaz Ordaz who determined [the closures], as a reprisal for the participation of the normales rurales in the '68 movement. That is what we thought back then, and to this day I believe that was the reason they disappeared. . . . We were a center of agitation."<sup>2</sup>

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1. The *escuelas normales rurales* (or variations such as the *escuelas regionales campesinas*) were created in the 1920s after the Mexican Revolution. For a history of their founding and early years, see Alicia Civera Cerecedo, *La escuela como opción de vida: la formación de maestros normalistas rurales en México, 1921–1945* (Zinacantepec, Mexico: El Colegio Mexiquense, 2008).

2. Gabino, "Nos tocó vivir la guerra sucia," in *Memorias Inquietas: de estudiantes rurales a guerrilleros urbanos*, Carla I. Villanueva and Aleida García Aguirre, eds. (Mexico City: Colectivo Memorias Subalternas, 2019), 97.

Rafael, who also experienced the reform firsthand, was convinced that the school closures took place in 1968, not 1969. He remembered that after the *Marcha por la Ruta de la Libertad*, which took place in 1968, “there was a different environment and we began to hear that the normales rurales were going to disappear.”<sup>3</sup> In their descriptions of the education reform as the “disappearance” of their schools, both Gabino and Rafael connected it to the year 1968, emblematic of both student movements and government repression in Mexico City. Their memories speak to the way in which the reform was experienced—as retribution for the political activities of the normalistas rurales.

The 1969 reform marked a moment of change in the history of the normales rurales. The SEP depicted the education reform as a necessary step for the modernization of education in the country. Nonetheless, the reform was politicized, through the government anxieties produced by the politically active normalistas rurales. After the *Marcha por la Ruta de la Libertad* in Guanajuato in February 1968, the government led a crusade to delegitimize the *Federación de Estudiantes Campesinos Socialistas de México (FECSM)*, which united the normalistas rurales from what were then 29 campuses. The march was a display of the political potential of the FECSM and its growing ties with other student sectors, especially through the *Central Nacional de Estudiantes Democráticos (CNED)*, a national coalition created in 1963.<sup>4</sup> Authorities reacted to the march with a series of public and private assaults against the FECSM that were meant to delegitimize the federation. These attacks did not end until the education reform was implemented, between mid July and September of 1969.

As part of the implementation process, the SEP led a public campaign to promote the reform as a change that would benefit rural youth. The position of the SEP diverged substantially from that of the FECSM, which instead saw the reform as an unwarranted attack. During this 20-month period, beginning with the *Marcha por la Ruta de la Libertad* and ending with the implementation of the reform, the relationship between the SEP and FECSM deteriorated. The campaign to undermine the FECSM ended with the annihilation of the student federation: under the changes that the SEP enforced in 1969, the FECSM was prohibited from operating within the schools.

The particulars of how the reform came to be and how it was applied remain nebulous, mainly because of the absence of research on the normales rurales. In her seminal work on rural teacher-training institutions, Alicia Civera Cerecedo

3. Rafael, “Dentro de los males, estuvo bien,” *Memorias inquietas*, 182.

4. The FECSM was founded in 1935 at the Roque campus in Guanajuato. The FECSM still exists and remains the national student federation of the normales rurales.

demonstrates that the institutional particularities of the various campuses were contingent on both local politics and student and teacher involvement. In the post-Revolution years, teacher-training institutions held a considerable amount of autonomy from the SEP because the schools were not a priority.<sup>5</sup> The financial abandonment and the inefficient administrative responses created constant problems. Civera Cerecedo's research on the normales rurales ends with the presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-46), but there has been a recent surge of interest in the topic. Historians are beginning to unravel the politics of the students and their presence in campesino movements, especially in northern Mexico, and are also writing case studies of individual campuses, from their founding to more recent years.<sup>6</sup> These works are a necessary step toward inserting the normales rurales into the sociopolitical history of twentieth-century Mexico, especially for the post-1940 period, and also into the historiography of student politics in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, I consider a specific aspect of the history of normales rurales: the institutional relationship between the SEP and the FECSM in the late 1960s. I situate the SEP's implementation of the reform as part of what Wil Panster has called "state-making in gray zones." As he explains, "What characterizes much of Mexican state-making is messiness, ambiguity, contradiction, and diversity."<sup>8</sup> The SEP grounded its justification for the reform in international trends in education policy, which at the time were focused on the need to separate secondary education from professionalization. Applying this principle, the SEP was able to frame the reform as a necessary change. On the ground, however, the reform was violent, punitive, and secretive.

5. Civera Cerecedo, *La escuela como opción de vida*.

6. Examples include Sergio Ortiz Briano, *Entre la nostalgia y la incertidumbre: movimiento estudiantil en el normalismo rural mexicano* (Zacatecas: Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, 2012); Tanalís Padilla, "Latent Sites of Agitation: Normalistas Rurales and Chihuahua's Agrarian Struggle in the 1960s," in *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression during the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies*, Jaime M. Pensado and Enrique C. Ochoa, eds. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018); Marcelo Hernández Santo, *Tiempos de reforma: estudiantes, profesores y autoridades de la Escuela Normal Rural de San Marcos frente a las reformas educativas, 1926-1984* (Zacatecas: Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas, 2003); Gregorio Hernández Grajales, *El normalísimo rural en Chiapas: origen, desarrollo y crisis* (Self-published, 2004); and Aleida García Aguirre, *La revolución que llegaría: experiencias de solidaridad y redes de maestros y normalistas en el movimiento campesino y la guerrilla moderna en Chihuahua, 1960-1968* (Mexico City: Colectivo Memorias Subalternas, 2015). A doctoral dissertation on the FECSM, which should be used with caution because it is based on the highly censored and biased DFS files, is Mónica Naymich López Macedonio, "Historia de una relación institucional. Los estudiantes normalistas rurales organizados en la Federación de Estudiantes Campesinos Socialistas de México y el Estado mexicano del siglo XX (1935-1969)," (PhD diss.: Colegio de México, 2016).

7. Most of the field-changing research on education in Mexico is about the immediate post-Revolution years. Examples are Susana Quintanilla and Mary Kay Vaughan, *Escuela y sociedad en el periodo cardenista* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997); Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997); and Elsie Rockwell, *Hacer escuela, hacer Estado: la educación posrevolucionaria vista desde Tlaxcala* (Mexico City: Colegio de Michoacán, CIESAS, CINVESTAV, 2007).

8. Wil G. Panster, "Zones and Languages of State-Making: From Pax Priista to Dirty War," in *México Beyond 1968*, Pensado and Ochoa, eds., 45.

Within the SEP, a massive bureaucracy with more than 150,000 employees, education officials did not have a uniform political position.<sup>9</sup> Many of them were themselves teachers, aligned with one of the numerous political lefts within the country, and several sympathized with the normalistas rurales, among them school director and inspector José Santos Valdés and his nephew and school principal Vicente Valdés Valdés. In spite of the varied positions held by its rank and file, the bureaucracy participated in the violent implementation of the education reform. High-level education authorities aided in the regulation, control, and surveillance of students, a key aspect of the authoritarian political practices of Cold War Mexico.<sup>10</sup> More specifically, the Dirección General de Educación Normal (DGEN), the branch within the SEP that was in charge of the normales rurales, was central to the surveillance of rural students in these schools, as it had been since the late 1950s. The Dirección Federal de Seguridad (DFS), Mexico's federal spy agency, depended on the information provided by education officials from this branch to track students and their actions.<sup>11</sup> And it was because of the partnership between the SEP and the DFS that the government was able to halt student political activity in these schools in 1969.

In light of the recent fiftieth anniversary of “Global 1968,” many historians of Mexico have called for what Jaime Pensado and Enrique Ochoa term “the provincialization of 1968,” that is, the need to re-imagine the impact of the various episodes of student activism and the incidents of state violence by looking beyond what took place in the nation's capital.<sup>12</sup> One tangible approach to reframing the '68 chronicle is through the normales rurales. With 29 schools located across 23 states, and more than 10,000 students, the normales rurales were sites of great concern for the presidency of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-70). Agustín Yáñez, director of the SEP under Díaz Ordaz and an influential novelist as well as governor of Jalisco from 1953 to 1958, adopted a stance toward students that mirrored that of the president. Both men saw the continuous student protests as a product of the absence of discipline. Authorities framed those opposed to the education reform as an impediment to national progress.<sup>13</sup> The successful enactment of the reform therefore depended

9. Cecilia Greaves, “La búsqueda de la modernidad,” in *Historia mínima: la educación en México*, vol. 1., Pablo Escalante and Dorothy Tanck Estrada, eds. (Mexico City: Seminario de Historia de la Educación en México, Colegio de México, 2010), 202.

10. Political surveillance of the normales rurales had been part of the bureaucratic culture of the SEP since their founding, but in the 1960s, this practice merged with the government's Cold War anxieties regarding students. See Civera Cerecedo, *La escuela como opción de vida*.

11. The DFS was a massive surveillance agency that infiltrated all aspects of Mexican politics and civil society.

12. Pensado and Ochoa, *México beyond 1968*, 271.

13. “El problema de la Escuela Normal de San Diego Tekax: el Prof. Espinosa Granados declara que existe una conjura,” *Diario de Yucatán*, August 3, 1969.

on the substantial weakening of both the FECSM and the *sociedades de alumnos*, the student associations on the local campuses.

By provincializing the events that took place in Mexico City, I allow previously marginalized people and events to emerge. I show that as events unfolded in Mexico City, another battle regarding students' political activity was being fought in the normales rurales. De-centering the 1968 urban university narrative does not mean that what occurred in the normales rurales was completely disconnected from the events in Mexico City, or from the historiography of student movements. The normales rurales were institutions specifically for poor children from rural areas. They were locations of opportunity where every year thousands of students took entrance exams with the hope of being one of the lucky few admitted. They were part of both the physical and sociopolitical makeup of rural Mexico. As such, the FECSM used the collective political identity of "campesino-student" to denote the low socioeconomic class of the normalistas rurales.

Nonetheless, normalistas rurales were indeed students, a position defined and supported through the FECSM's actions and networks, and also in the relationship between students and education authorities. In other words, it is important to conceive of normalistas rurales as students. Otherwise, we risk further marginalizing their political participation in student movements. Through the FECSM, normalistas rurales participated in student mobilizations and "popular student" actions, as did "liberal" university students, and had done so since the 1930s. In the 1960s, "popular students" and liberal university students established common spaces in which their politics overlapped. In the case of the FECSM, this took place within the Central Nacional de Estudiantes Democráticos coalition.<sup>14</sup> Although authorities considered the normalistas rurales as distinct from urban student groups, they nonetheless viewed them as part of the broader "student problem" in the 1960s. By using a new periodization, from the Marcha por la Ruta de la Libertad to the issuing of the education reform, I de-center the 1968 urban events, without detaching rural students from their urban counterparts.

This article brings together the administrative archives located in the normales rurales, newspaper articles, and DFS reports to show how the actions of normalistas rurales produced anxiety within the SEP and led to the subsequent deployment of an educational reform by authorities to neutralize the political voice of the rural students. The normales rurales I visited include Cañada

14. Ilan Semo, "La oposición estudiantil: ¿Una oposición sin atributos?" *DIE-CINVESTAV, Cuadernos de Investigaciones Educativas* 11 (March 1983).

Honda, Aguascalientes; Aguilera, Durango (this campus also houses the documents from the Salaces campus, which was closed in 1969); Saucillo, Chihuahua; San Marcos, Zacatecas; and Tamazulapan, Oaxaca.<sup>15</sup> Only recently have school administrators opened and begun to organize documents at these campuses, and access to the schools depends on approval from each school's director. And while the types of documents vary by campus, many of these archives hold files regarding the internal decisions of the federal SEP offices that are not found elsewhere, especially because relevant SEP materials are missing from the archives at the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN).

In the case of the normales rurales, the government's anxieties during this period were mainly shaped by the inability of SEP officials to control how and when students participated in political spaces outside of the schools and by the students' continuous participation in decision-making within the campuses. In the months leading up to the reform, SEP official Ramón Bonfil Viveros regularly commented on the way in which students overstepped their place in the schools—they had too much power.<sup>16</sup> Simultaneous to the protests in Mexico City, which have received far more attention, the SEP embarked on the drafting of an education reform that called for a complete restructuring of the normales rurales. The use of an education reform to control students was not as visible to the public as the use of military, police, and paramilitary. However, the institutional responses of the SEP were not necessarily less violent, and in the case of the normales rurales, that violence is a necessary factor in understanding the fraught relationship with the government.

### **“IT IS NECESSARY TO DISAPPEAR THE ESCUELAS NORMALES RURALES”**

Before the 1969 education reform, rumors of school closures constantly loomed over the normales rurales, generated by a range of political and pedagogical issues.<sup>17</sup> To begin with, there was in this period an international push to separate and unify secondary education and also to promote technical studies, a process in which Mexican education officials participated.<sup>18</sup> The change

15. I also visited the Atequiza normal rural in the state of Jalisco but the directors denied me access.

16. Circular 4, from DGEN to the normales rurales, January 1969, Archivo Histórico Escuela Normal Rural Aguilera [hereafter AHENRA], folder: Circulares de la Dirección General de Enseñanza Normal, 1966–1969.

17. “Necesaria desaparición de las ‘Escuelas Normales Rurales,’” letter from the Confederación de Jóvenes Mexicanos, published in *El Universal*, March 14, 1968.

18. Charles Dorn and Kristen Ghodsee, “The Cold War Politicization of Literacy: Communism, UNESCO, and the World Bank,” *Diplomatic History* 36:2 (2012): 373–398, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2011.01026.x>; Inés Dussel and Christian Ydesen, “Jaime Torres Bodet, Mexico, and the Struggle over International Understanding and

corresponded with the SEP's plans to promote mid-level education and the government's general discourse regarding the role of education in the economic progress of the nation. Second, outside of and apart from the SEP bureaucracy, DFS agents had begun to discuss institutional changes to the normales rurales after a small group of armed militants that included rural teachers and students attacked a military barracks in Madera, Chihuahua, in 1965. After this assault, DFS agents reported that closing the schools was an option to stop the activism in the normales rurales.<sup>19</sup> Third, discussion regarding possible school closures became more concrete in 1967, after a SEP education conference about rural teacher training.<sup>20</sup> Although the changes under discussion were not adopted at the time, proposals for restructuring the schools were presented and discussed. Finally, there were decades-old discourses within the SEP about the normales rurales being problematic institutions. Education officials believed that the schools were plagued with a lack of student discipline, inefficient internal administration, an inadequate filtering process for student admissions, and a lack in primary teacher morality.

The previous points provide the larger context of the issues between the normales rurales and the SEP's education plans, and the SEP relied on these points to help justify the 1969 reform. The possibility of restructuring the normales rurales was therefore present long before the reform and was motivated by a range of factors. However, in 1968 there was a clear shift in the government's view of these schools, and what took place between 1968 and 1969 had a new dimension: it was a direct and concerted effort on the part of authorities to limit students' political influence in the schools. It was a punitive action motivated in large part by the Díaz Ordaz government's plan to stop student mobilizations.

In February 1968, the FECSM had participated in and helped organize the *Marcha por la Ruta de la Libertad*, to demand the liberation of political prisoners. Although authorities perceived it as primarily a march of normalistas rurales, the originally intended five-day march from Guanajuato to Michoacán united students from various educational institutions. The coalition that united

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History Writing: The UNESCO experience," in *UNESCO without Borders: Educational Campaigns for International Understanding*, Aigul Kulnazarova and Christian Ydesen, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); SEP, "Informe sobre el movimiento educativo en México durante el año escolar 1968-1969," for the XXIII Session of the International Conference of Public Education, (Switzerland: SEP, 1970).

19. Report of the Federación de Estudiantes Campesinos Socialistas de México [hereafter FECSM], versión pública, October 28, 1965, Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo Gobernación, Dirección Federal de Seguridad [hereafter AGN-DFS], caja 61, leg. 1/31. (October 28, 1965 report). In the successive citations in this article, the abbreviation 'vp' following a document name designates the versión pública of a document, that is, the censored public version government document.

20. The conference was called the Primera Asamblea Nacional de Educación Normal Rural. According to some DFS reports, the main reason the proposals were not adopted was the intervention of José Santos Valdés. José Santos Valdés, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 198 legajo único.

the participating students was the Central Nacional de Estudiantes Democráticos. The march was cut short when military forces intercepted students in the Valle de Santiago in Guanajuato and forced them to abandon their plans.<sup>21</sup> The march marked a moment of change: authorities increased their surveillance of students and began to attack the FECSM systematically.

The varied reactions of authorities within the SEP and the DFS to the march demonstrate the impact of the event and the simmering anxieties caused by the activism of the FECSM. Some attacks were outside of public view, while others were more public. For example, even before the march took place and as way to deter student participation, Alfonso Sierra Partida, then head of the Dirección General de Educación Normal, the SEP branch that was in charge of the normales rurales, sent copies of negative newspaper clippings to the schools. The articles mainly described how various communities in Guanajuato, where the march was to begin, were unequivocally in disagreement with the student march. For example, one article from the newspaper *El Universal*, titled “Repudiation on the Route of the ‘Red March,’” focused on the plans of campesino groups located along the route of the march to deny students passage.<sup>22</sup> Sierra Partida asked the directors to post the newspaper coverage in the schools for students to see to dissuade the normalistas from participating in the march.<sup>23</sup> This action was unusual: education officials did not commonly respond to student mobilizations in this way—before they even happened.

Then, after the march, Luis Echeverría, the head of the Secretaría de Gobernación and future president, involved himself in the negotiations between the SEP and the FECSM. The negotiation process was triggered by a January student petition, not originally related to the march, that focused on political prisoners. Petitions and negotiations of this type between authorities and students were part of the political culture between the SEP and the FECSM—they were the institutionalized form of communication. Through the FECSM central committee, the normalistas would create petitions and present their demands for the schools to the SEP. However, by participating in the process himself, Echeverría politicized the negotiation process, making it something much larger. He claimed that the FECSM petition was a ploy of the Mexican Communist Party (Partido Comunista de México, PCM) and of the Central Nacional de Estudiantes Democráticos coalition. On February 17, Echeverría

21. For more details about the march see Carla Irina Villanueva, “For the Liberation of Exploited Youth: Campesino-Students, the FECSM, and Mexican Student Politics in the 1960s,” in *México Beyond 1968*, Pensado and Ochoa, eds.

22. “Repudio en la ruta de la ‘Marcha Roja,’” *El Universal*, January 9, 1968, Archivo Histórico Escuela Normal Rural San Marcos [hereafter AHENRSM], folder: sobre el 68, algunas referencias.

23. Circular no. 5, Dirección General de Enseñanza Normal, Subdirección Técnica, January 22, 1968, AHENRA, folder: año escolar 1967/1968, exp. 100.1.



sent a telegram to all state governors in which he claimed that the Mexican Communist Party and the coalition, in an attempt to further agitate students, were preventing normalistas rurales from receiving the correct information. He instructed authorities to sidestep the FECSM and inform all normalistas rurales that the SEP had adequately responded to the student demands.<sup>24</sup> In the telegram, Echeverría disregarded the internal student organizing structures and directly involved himself in smearing the FECSM. Echeverría's hidden involvement in the negotiations marked a change in the ways in which the government dealt with the normales rurales.

Furthermore, on February 28, Agustín Yáñez, head of the SEP, met with Díaz Ordaz to discuss the same post-march negotiations that concerned Echeverría.<sup>25</sup> Authorities were worried that other student groups would expect the same treatment if the SEP gave in to the demands. The main point of contention was a one-peso-per-student increase in the student stipend, requested by the FECSM. Bonfil Viveros, then newly appointed director of the DGEN, did not want to increase the stipend, out of concern that the additional money would end up in the hands of the CNED, the same coalition that had worked with the FECSM to organize the February march.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, as part of its non-public response to the march, the DFS began to collect a new type of information on the normales rurales and their students. Regional DFS agents were instructed by the agency to gather information about the relationships between the students of the normales rurales and the campesino groups that surrounded the schools. The reports included details concerning the main grievances of each community, the names of local leaders, and which campesino coalitions dominated local politics and whether they supported the normalistas rurales.<sup>27</sup> The reports essentially described which normales rurales had nearby campesino groups that the government could count on for support. These DFS reports foreshadowed one of the strategies that the SEP used to implement its education reform: securing the physical and political support of the corporatist campesino coalition, the Confederación Nacional Campesina (National Campesino Coalition, CNC).

24. February 17, 1968, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 3/31, p 60.

25. February 28, 1968, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 3/31, p 91.

26. Ramón Bonfil Viveros replaced Alfonso Sierra Partida as director of DGEN in January or February 1968, a change that was perceived as part of the strategy against students and did not go over well with the FECSM. All normalistas rurales were to receive a recreational stipend, which was given first to the local student associations to be passed on to the individual students, a transfer that rarely happened. The stipend funds often remained in control of the local student associations and were commonly used to fund school activities. FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 3/31.

27. March, 1968, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 3/31, p 296 - 324.

The pre-march newspaper clippings that Sierra Partida sent to the campuses, Echeverría's involvement in the FECSM negotiations, and the new DFS reports were all out of public view. But there was also a series of more public assaults on the FECSM after the *Marcha por la Ruta de la Libertad*. For example, on March 1, Agustín Yáñez published a letter regarding the state of negotiations between the SEP and the FECSM. The purpose was to show that the SEP had negotiated in earnest with the FECSM and that the source of the problem was the *normalistas rurales*. Then, most likely as a directive from the president's office, both the *Confederación Nacional Campesina* and the *Confederación de Jóvenes Mexicanos* (Coalition of Mexican Youth, CJM) published condemnatory pieces against the FECSM in the national newspapers. Both the CNC and the CJM were part of the corporatist structure of Mexican politics that linked large sectors (for example, labor, or *campesinos*) to the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional). The FECSM had in the past worked closely with both of these PRI-aligned coalitions, but like many other groups, it distanced itself from them in the mid 1960s. The CNC drew up a public letter calling on the FECSM to negotiate with the SEP in good faith.<sup>28</sup> The CJM letter, however, was more destructive, calling directly for the elimination of the *normales rurales* and pointing to the *Marcha por la Ruta de la Libertad* as evidence of the downfall of the schools.<sup>29</sup> These public attacks against the FECSM were indications of a concerted government campaign to delegitimize the students' demands.

Considered together, these actions demonstrate how authorities implemented a multi-method attack against the FECSM. They are also revealing of the authorities' central concerns, one of them being the relationship between the *normales rurales* and the CNED, the student coalition that helped organize the march and became central to the student mobilizations in Mexico City in 1968. The FECSM was participating in spaces outside of the corporatist state, which challenged the legitimacy of the SEP's continued work with those groups. But the march was just the beginning. The year 1968 was tumultuous for the *normales rurales* in many other ways: the FECSM and the *sociedades de alumnos* (the local student associations) went on to organize countless actions, including letter-writing, work stoppages, and strikes.

## EDUCATION REFORM IN THE FACE OF STUDENT DISSENT

In the context of these post-march tensions and the escalating student demonstrations in Mexico City, SEP officials drafted an education reform that

28. Confederación Nacional Campesina, "A los estudiantes de las Escuelas Normales Rurales," letter published in *El Universal*, March 2, 1968.

29. "Necesaria desaparición de las 'Escuelas Normales Rurales.'"

called for the restructuring of the normales rurales. On September 1, 1968, during his fourth presidential address, Díaz Ordaz called for a “profound” reform for all levels of education, triggering the creation of various working groups.<sup>30</sup> In his speech, the president also called on youth to participate in building a better country. Reflecting the political environment of the time, he warned youth not to assume the role of false heroes by rebelling against society. He stated: “Deceived by the illusion of believing they are heroes, they soon learned that their heroism was false.”<sup>31</sup> SEP director Yáñez later reinforced these sentiments about the unwarranted rebellions in a speech about the education reform: “Young people should have illusions, but they should not let themselves hallucinate. . . . It is without study, without preparation, without discipline, without ideals, and only with mere disorder and violence that they plan to improve the current world.”<sup>32</sup> Both Díaz Ordaz and Yáñez framed the student protests as actions without plans and without concrete ideas about how to improve society. These ongoing critiques of youth, in the context of their discourses regarding the education reform, were an indication of the position from which authorities approached the changes. Student control and discipline were clear expectations of the forthcoming reform.

With rumors of a reform looming, and just one month after the October 2, 1968, Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City, the SEP temporarily closed the normales rurales from the Calendar A group. The 29 campuses were organized by the SEP into two groups, Calendar A and Calendar B, the only difference being their academic calendar. On November 5, 1968, when the students from Calendar A campuses were scheduled to return to classes after their annual vacation period, the military denied them access.<sup>33</sup> Without warning, half of the normales rurales were closed. These were not the same campuses that were eventually closed under the reform in 1969, but the closures caused confusion, rumors, and panic about the status of the normales rurales.<sup>34</sup> The unannounced temporary school closures of the Calendar A schools in November 1968 further polarized relations between the normalistas rurales and

30. The commission met in September 1968 and included six working groups that functioned under the Consejo Nacional Técnico de la Educación (CNTE). The working groups met throughout the year and were coordinated by top SEP officials such as Celerino Cano, Lucas Ortiz, Alfonso Sierra Partida, and Ramón Bonfil. “El maestro y la Reforma Educativa: consideraciones y tesis expuestas por el Secretario de Educación Pública, licenciado Agustín Yáñez, al celebrarse el Día del Maestro, el 15 de mayo de 1969,” *El Maestro* 1, July 1969, 123; Documentos de consulta para iniciar la reforma educativa: guión de la Sección II, (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional Técnico de la Educación, 1968).

31. “Principios doctrinarios para la Reforma: parte relativa del cuarto informe que rindió al Congreso de la Unión el C. Presidente de la República, licenciado Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, el 1º de septiembre de 1968,” *El Maestro* 1, July 1969, 17.

32. “El Maestro y la Reforma Educativa: Consideraciones y tesis expuestas por el Secretario de Educación Pública, licenciado Agustín Yáñez, al celebrarse el Día del Maestro, el 15 de mayo de 1969,” *El Maestro*, num. 1, segunda quincena de Julio, 1969, 123.

33. November 10, 1968, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 4/31, p 162.

34. Some schools categorized the November 1968 problem as a strike. The students at the Escuela Normal Rural de San Marcos in Zacatecas, for example, said that they went on strike. See Hernández Santos, *Tiempos de reforma*, 285.

the SEP. Students immediately mobilized. Students from the Escuela Normal Rural de Miguel Hidalgo (Atequiza) in Guanajuato passed out flyers that read: “The government has declared its intention to transform our schools into a different type. We pronounce ourselves completely against this change, because we believe that our schools represent the most precious conquest of our pueblo.”<sup>35</sup>

Even before the announcement of the reform, students had perceived that the changes would include an institutional transformation. On November 10, the students from the Escuela Normal Rural de Jalisco in the state of Nayarit stated that most of the normales rurales were under military vigilance, including those that were not closed. For example, they claimed that two military vehicles from Military Zone 13/a were watching their school.<sup>36</sup> There were also reports of arrests. Students from the Escuela Normal Rural de Lauro Aguirre (Tamatán) in the state of Tamaulipas believed that authorities had detained at least 25 normalistas rurales: eight from Jalisco, Nayarit; 13 from El Quinto, Sonora; three from Atequiza, Jalisco; and one from Perote, Veracruz.<sup>37</sup>

While these numbers were unconfirmed, there were in fact widespread detentions. One example was Teresa Aviña García, from Atequiza. Teresa was the president of the student association at Atequiza in 1968 and member of the local Juventud Comunista de México (JCM). In the first week of November, the army detained her for the alleged possession of a gun and subversive propaganda, and she was held at the military base in Mexico City. Teresa’s detention caused outcry and protests on her campus. The principal of the Atequiza campus, Fidelina Cervantes Barrera, reached out to education authorities on behalf of her student. With complete disregard for Teresa’s safety, Bonfil Viveros responded by stating that it was the principal’s responsibility to control the outings and actions of her students.<sup>38</sup> With the help of her classmates Leticia Montes Rodríguez, Elba Moreno, and Alicia Martínez, Teresa was released on November 14.

Teresa’s detention and the temporary closure of the Calendar A campuses were indicators of the political tension within the normales rurales at the end of 1968. On November 24, the SEP reopened the Calendar A schools, after negotiations with students and parents in Mexico City on November 18.<sup>39</sup> But the ability to close down multiple campuses while simultaneously watching

35. Leticia Montes Rodríguez, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 318.

36. November 10, 1968, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 4/31, p 162.

37. November 11, 1968, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 4/31, p 178.

38. Teresa Aviña García, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 318.

39. Letter from parent from the parents’ association (*sociedad de padres de familia*) of Cañada Honda, November 24, 1968, Archivo Histórico de las Escuela Normal Rural de Cañada Honda [hereafter AHENRCH].

over the students in the other schools was a show of force. Five months after the temporary school closures, the SEP held the IV National Conference on Normal Education, in Saltillo, Coahuila, from April 28 to May 3, 1969.<sup>40</sup> It was at this conference that the reform was officially announced. A total of 267 delegates attended, including school principals, inspectors, and students. As had occurred at the 1967 conference, SEP officials presented the restructuring process as a step toward modernization, arguing that the reform was an investment in the future of the country, that it would improve the type of teacher that Mexico produced, and that it would expand opportunities for rural youth.<sup>41</sup>

Specifically, the reform demanded the following changes: the creation of a new secondary system called *escuelas secundarias técnicas agropecuarias* (agricultural-technical secondary schools); the removal of the secondary level cycle from the normales rurales (students were to enter the normal rural only after receiving a secondary education elsewhere, instead of entering after completing primary school); and the addition of one year to the professional teacher-training curriculum, bringing it to a total of four years. Instead of constructing additional campuses for the new *escuelas secundarias técnicas agropecuarias*, the government seized some of the normales rurales for the new system. Of the 29 campuses, 12 were appropriated for the *técnicas agropecuarias* (eight for men, four for women), and 15 remained normales rurales (ten for men, five for women). The Perote campus in Veracruz was completely closed down, and the Roque campus in Guanajuato remained a specialized technical agricultural school (neither a secondary school nor a normal rural). The result was a massive reorganization of students, administrators, and teachers.<sup>42</sup>

At the SEP conference in Saltillo, Yáñez expressed his sentiments about the problems that faced teacher-training institutions in Mexico, including the lack of “vocation, moral formation, general culture . . . and spirit of social service.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the final SEP report from this conference stated that not all campesino youth should have access to teacher-training education. Officials wanted only students who as teachers would “contribute to reconcile

40. There were a series of conferences and planning meetings apart from what took place in Saltillo. Some were regional and some were national.

41. To contain the student outcry after Saltillo, SEP officials claimed that the documents produced at the conference were merely suggestions and that the proposed reform would have to be ratified in July 1969 by the CNTE. While ratification may have been key to the legal process needed for the reform to pass, the reality was that the SEP began implementing the reform before the July CNTE meeting. Then, on July 29, 1969, the CNTE officially approved the reform at its VIII Asamblea Nacional Plenaria.

42. The reorganization of teachers was also problematic. Some teachers were expected to relocate to other schools, and once the school year began not all campuses had the necessary teachers. Letter to Ramón G. Bonfil from principal of Escuela Normal Rural de Aguilera Andrés Silva Zavala, September 30, 1969, AHENRA, folder: minutario 1969/1970.

43. “Declaratoria del IV Congreso Nacional de Educación Normal,” *El Maestro* 1, July 1969, 67.

the reason of the just demands of the new generations with the norms of institutional order.”<sup>44</sup> Those who were not equipped or willing to support the goals of the SEP needed to consider different career paths.

After the Saltillo conference, the rumors of school closures turned into reality. When it was learned that the normales rurales were to undergo a major reform, there was a race between students and authorities to physically occupy the school campuses. Physical control of the school was significant: whoever controlled the campus controlled whether the enrollment process would begin, so the only way for students to halt the reform was to impede the campuses from functioning. At the same time, authorities understood that they needed complete control of the campuses before the enrollment dates for the school year, in September 1969. The dynamic concerning the control of the campuses varied from school to school. With students dispersed in their hometowns during the vacation period, authorities were able to occupy many of the campuses easily. And, whether because of fear, the logistical limitations created by the vacation period, or perhaps because of local politics that influenced the decisions of the various local student associations, not all campuses resisted the reform.

Beginning in July 1969, the SEP used newspaper articles, radio announcements, letters to parents, and local meetings to convince the public that the reform was a positive change. Central to the SEP’s public message was the notion that the schools were *not* going to close, but rather be restructured. In the early months, some newspaper articles used the word “closure,” but the SEP quickly tightened its public campaign and newspapers began to uniformly describe the changes as a “restructuring.”<sup>45</sup> Throughout this process, the SEP provided various, overlapping arguments to justify the changes. Some of them were sensational, but all of them upheld the idea that the reform would improve the normales rurales, even though only half of them would remain. For example, education officials stressed that it was imperative to separate the different age levels because there was “promiscuity among students from 13 to 25 years old, which on multiple occasions caused grave problems, always to the detriment of secondary-level students, due to their younger age.”<sup>46</sup> They also spoke of the need to separate distinct student populations in diverse stages of development. One of the least used claims, but perhaps the most incendiary, was that the

44. “Declaratoria del IV Congreso Nacional de Educación Normal,” 68.

45. For example, newspapers in Durango and Chihuahua printed the same inaccurate report: that “all 14” of the normales rurales were to be closed and converted to secondary technical- agricultural schools. Mario Rojas Sedeño, “Serán aulas agropecuarias todas las normales rurales: producirán magnífica mano de obra campesina,” *El Sol de Durango* and *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, both July 24, 1969.

46. SEP-DGEN, Más y mejor educación para los campesinos de México: las escuelas técnicas agropecuarias y las normales rurales, August 1969, AHENRCH.

normales rurales were being overrun by non-campesino youth and that the reform would ensure that this practice did not continue.<sup>47</sup>

The SEP's most frequently repeated justification for the changes, however, was that campesino youth were being forced to become teachers because of the absence of other schools in rural areas. As understood by education authorities, teacher training was, "practically the only path for them to improve culturally, socially, and economically, since there [was] not a decent number of middle and upper level schools in rural areas."<sup>48</sup> As a result, there were young people who became educators "without vocation," who had no interest in becoming teachers.<sup>49</sup> The state SEP offices pushed this message in the newspapers. For example, the SEP director for the state of Coahuila, Domingo Adame Vega, explained that SEP officials had discovered that the bad teachers were those who came out of the normales rurales and who had entered only because they had no other options.<sup>50</sup>

To legitimate their argument, the SEP depended on the backing of the National Campesino Coalition, the CNC. The CNC not only announced its full support of the reform, but the local chapters helped by holding informational meetings with parents, giving statements to the press, and later by physically occupying some of the campuses to deny access to students. The CNC helped authorities occupy at least four of the schools, including La Huerta (Michoacán), Atequiza (Jalisco), Salaices (Chihuahua), and Galeana (Nuevo León). José Isabel Alonso Carreón, president of the Liga de Comunidades Agrarias in the state of Puebla helped the SEP by holding informational meetings with parents from the various campuses in Puebla (Champusco, Teteles, and Zaragoza). Alonso Carreón also participated in the actual policing of normalistas rurales. He reported that the CNC took a student leader from the Zaragoza campus, Miguel Zúñiga, to the police.<sup>51</sup> The position of the CNC received widespread coverage in the state newspapers.<sup>52</sup> With the help of the CNC, the SEP was able to claim that the changes aimed at the normales rurales would lead to the expansion of opportunities for campesino youth—while simultaneously closing half of them down.

47. SEP-DGEN, Más y mejor educación para los campesinos de México, AHENRCH.

48. SEP-DGEN, Más y mejor educación para los campesinos de México, AHENRCH.

49. "La separación de los dos ciclos de la enseñanza," *El Diario de Yucatán*, August 3, 1969.

50. "Sólo será reestructurada la Normal de Santa Teresa," *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 6, 1969.

51. August 1969, Letter from Jose I. Alonso Carreón to governor of Puebla, Rafael Moreno Valle, August 1, 1969, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 5/31.

52. "Acto de justicia a la juventud campesina," *El Heraldo de México*, July 24, 1969; "La Liga Campesina elogia las reformas a normales rurales," *El Sol de Durango*, August 2, 1969; "Durango: apoyo campesino a las escuelas agropecuarias," *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 2, 1969.

The official public SEP campaign did not include a critique of the political activism of normalistas rurales. Since the reform was framed as a positive measure, it would have been a contradiction to do so. Although education officials such as Yáñez spoke negatively about students in general, they did not correlate those critiques with the reform in their public statements. Some editorial articles, however, strayed from the official SEP talking points and addressed the glaring issue of the political activism of the students. The fact that these schools were perceived as hotbeds of leftist thought was not lost on the press.

Perhaps a beloved teacher of Chihuahua was right, when he gave his personal version of the reorganization of normal schooling: “The Escuelas Normales Rurales, will be closed because of the delirious left, which has lost all notion of reality and of proportion. It is not conceivable that the Government remain blind to the maneuvering of radical political groups that are taking advantage of the good faith of young students of campesino origins.”<sup>53</sup>

This editorial statement not only signaled the school closures as a necessary step to control the expansion of leftist groups but also made the closures a type of government responsibility. In highlighting this point, the reporter also unintentionally reinforced the argument put forth by the FECSM, which was that the reform was a response to student politics.

### “IN DEFENSE OF THE NORMALES RURALES”

As the SEP drafted the reform and began its public campaign, the FECSM and the local student associations went through their own processes. In 1969, normalistas rurales held two important conferences, which became spaces from which students built their arguments and produced documents to explain their position against the reform. While the local student associations held considerable autonomy from the FECSM and created their own campaigns at a local level, the national FECSM documents and meetings helped create a generally uniform message across the various campuses. Although they had far fewer resources than the SEP, students also turned to newspapers, radio, flyers, and public meetings to argue their case. Some state newspapers covered the campus protests organized by the local student associations. The Mexico City-based newspaper of the PCM, *La Voz de México*, published the official stance taken by the FECSM, including an interview with Adolfo Lozano Pérez and Carlos Muñoz, the Federation’s general secretary and secretary of finance, respectively.

53. Rodolfo Rojas Maciel, “Normales Rurales: transformadas en escuelas técnicas agropecuarias,” *El Heraldo de Chihuahua*, August 5, 1969.



At the Atequiza campus, from February 8 to 15, 1969, normalistas rurales held the First Seminar for the Democratic Reform of Rural Normal Education, which students framed as “the point of departure” in their fight.<sup>54</sup> This was not a traditional annual FECSM conference at which students voted on their officers or drafted petitions for the SEP. Together with other coalitions, such as the Central Campesina Independiente (CCI), students discussed what they believed a democratic education reform had to contain.<sup>55</sup> The conference singled out the ongoing work with the Central Nacional de Estudiantes Democráticos and the breakdown in communication between the FECSM and the SEP. It became clear that the FECSM no longer saw the government-organized conferences as viable places to express its concerns about the future of education.

The ideas produced at this conference were published in the *Declaration of Atequiza*, a document that included a history of the 30-years-plus struggle of “the exploited campesino masses, the working pueblo, and the thousands of youth who have been trained in these schools,” prepared with the aim of keeping the normales rurales open. Indicating the ongoing communist influence within the FECSM, students described the forces that opposed them as the “old and new large estate owners and capitalists of rural areas.”<sup>56</sup> At the heart of the document, students questioned the education they received and critiqued the path the normales rurales had taken. Was their education for the benefit of campesinos or the (economic) benefit of others? The conference was guided by questions such as, “What do we want normal rural education to be?” and “What situation and social goals should it pursue?”<sup>57</sup> In the declaration, the political and economic changes in the countryside were presented alongside the history of schools. The document claimed that the independent campesino movement had been halted more than 20 years prior when the big capitalists regained control of the land, most likely referring to the end of the Cárdenas era land reforms and the presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940-46).<sup>58</sup> As part of these changes, the normales rurales no longer provided an education that promoted a just transformation of the countryside. The looming reform was framed as a continuation of these government policies.

54. *Declaración de Atequiza*, printed in *La Voz de México* (Suplemento: Documentos de la Federación de Estudiantes Campesinos Socialistas de México, Primer Seminario por la Reforma Democrática a la Educación Normal Rural), September 6, 1969.

55. According to Marcelo Hernández Santos, this conference was proposed by the Juventud Comunistas de México at the XII FECSM Congreso, which took place at the Escuela Normal Rural Mactumactzá, Chiapas, in May 1968. Hernández Santos, *Tiempos de Reforma*, 246–247.

56. *Declaración de Atequiza*.

57. *Declaración de Atequiza*.

58. For the importance of the Cárdenas era for the normales rurales, see Tanalís Padilla, “Memories of Justice: Rural Normales and the Cardenista Legacy,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 32:1 (2016): 111–143.

As a follow-up to the *Declaration of Atequiza*, the FECSM produced the *Manifiesto of Ayotzinapa*, during its XXIII Annual Conference at the Ayotzinapa (Guerrero) campus. In the manifesto, the FECSM adamantly opposed the agreements made at the SEP's Saltillo conference, claiming that the hidden purpose of the reform was to attack their schools, to divide or disappear their student federation, and to bring about the SEP's ultimate goal, which was the complete closure of their schools.<sup>59</sup> In its various manifestos, the FECSM provided historical context to justify its fear that the normales rurales would ultimately be completely shut down. It associated the education reform to a pattern of changes toward educational systems in Mexico that specifically served low-income students, such as the separation of pre-vocational schools of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional and the imposition of fees on universities in the *provincia* (areas outside of Mexico City).<sup>60</sup> It also spoke of the reform as an attack on its boarding schools by addressing the 1956 closure of the dormitories of the Instituto Politécnico Nacional and of the Escuela Nacional de Maestros, and the "bloody" closure of the Casa del Estudiante Nicolaíta in Morelia in 1966.<sup>61</sup> These framings not only put forth the FECSM's concerns but also illustrated the way in which they saw themselves in relation to other students.

The FECSM did not challenge the idea that campesino youth needed more opportunities and welcomed the creation of more schools, but its members took issue with the creation of those new schools at the cost of the normales rurales. Why not build the new secondary schools in separate locations and leave the normales rurales as they were? In one manifesto, the FECSM cited Édouard Claparède's *Experimental Pedagogy and the Psychology of the Child* as a way to argue that in all countries, youth chose teacher-training institutions for economic reasons, even in the United States.<sup>62</sup> It was common practice for the FECSM to draw from such kinds of readings, which students were presumably exposed to in their teacher-training curriculum, to argue their political points. The notion of becoming a teacher for the love of the profession, which is what the SEP wanted, was a contradiction to scientific thought and a false romanticism. Becoming a teacher was instead understood as a political process and a responsibility to one's community. In regard to the claim of promiscuity in the boarding schools, the FECSM argued that the government used this attack only because it could not find anything else to say.<sup>63</sup> The real problem, they said, was the *porras* (paid or hired agitators) in Mexico City. If it was true

59. *Manifiesto de Ayotzinapa*, printed in *La Voz de México* (Suplemento: Documentos de la FECSM), September 6, 1969.

60. "En defensa de las normales rurales contra la Reforma antipopular y reaccionaria," *La Voz de México* (Suplemento: Documentos de la FECSM), September 6, 1969.

61. "En defensa de las normales rurales."

62. "En defensa de las normales rurales."

63. "En defensa de las normales rurales."

that boarding schools fostered promiscuity, the FECSM demanded that the Mexican government inform the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) of this problem so that they could do away with all boarding schools in other countries.<sup>64</sup>

The various declarations helped the local student associations frame their messages for their own communities and were also used by the FECSM central committee to look for support among university students in Mexico City. In addition to these meetings, students also planned their strategy to protest the reform, which was to physically occupy and control the campuses. However, because of the government surveillance and infiltration of these spaces, authorities knew about the strategy beforehand and were able to plan accordingly.<sup>65</sup>

What succeeded was a violent implementation of the reform and the complete annihilation of the student organizing structures. Between mid July and September 1969 authorities physically adapted some of the normales rurales as secondary schools, redistributed students into different schools, and counteracted student attempts to stop the reform. It was an all-hands-on-deck process during which SEP representatives from Mexico City were sent to all of the normales rurales, and it became central to the collaboration between the federal and state SEP offices and the police, and in some cases the army and the DFS.<sup>66</sup> Yáñez did not shy away from admitting that the military was sent to the normales rurales, a central criticism brought by the students. However, he framed this as a necessary decision to protect the campuses.<sup>67</sup>

## IMPLEMENTING THE REFORM

In what follows, I provide three examples of how the reform was enacted and experienced in the schools. I chose these three campuses mainly because I was able to find a range of sources for each campus. The DFS reports on the implementation of the reform are copious, but the use of various sources provides a more complete picture of how the reform looked on the ground. To implement the reform, authorities needed to ensure that students did not take over the campuses, that they reported to their newly appointed campuses, and that they did not garner support from surrounding communities. As a result, authorities kicked students out of schools and local communities, impeded the successful

64. "En defensa de las normales rurales."

65. Adolfo Lozano Pérez, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 301.

66. "Representantes de la SEP en las escuelas normales rurales," *El Diario de Yucatán*, August 30, 1969.

67. Patricia Montenegro, "Líderes de las normales rurales. Serio problema para la educación: su labor es contra el país," *El Heraldo de México*, August 3, 1969.

organization of protests, and generally imposed a state of fear. It was here that the planned and systematic cooperation between the SEP and the DFS shone and proved too powerful against the organizing efforts of the students.

### *Escuela Normal Rural de San Diego Tekax, Yucatán*

At some campuses, authorities were able to occupy schools before students could get to them. At the Escuela Normal Rural de San Diego Tekax, for example, Yucatán state police occupied the campus and as a result, neither students nor administrators were given access.<sup>68</sup> With the help of the general secretary of the local student association, David Martín Briseño, students instead held their meetings at a nearby sports complex and organized trips to neighboring communities to seek moral and financial support. A group of alumni who were then working as primary school teachers, and some parents, joined the students in their fight.<sup>69</sup> Together they formed a coordinating committee, called the “pro-defense committee of the normales rurales.” Their message was clear: the reform would not help campesino youth as the SEP claimed it would; it would instead hinder their opportunities.

In addition to occupying the campus, authorities went after students who participated in activities in the community.<sup>70</sup> On August 15, police detained over 40 students who were on their way to attend a rally. The leaders were threatened, told to stop instigating problems, and pressured into returning to their hometowns.<sup>71</sup> A bus of normalistas rurales from the state of Tlaxcala, who were on their way to support their peers, were also stopped by the police, threatened, and escorted out of town.<sup>72</sup> The aggression increased when police shot at a group of five students who were posting flyers around town. One witness of the shooting, who wrote to the local newspaper to complain, claimed to have kept the police bullets from that night. The witness claimed that the bullets “were about to kill some people who at the entrance of the house, because the bullets passed just mere centimeters from them.”<sup>73</sup> The intimidation worked because by September 1, the student movement had receded, the police had withdrawn from the campus, and the school enrollment process had begun.

68. “Vigilancia militar en una escuela normal rural en San Diego, Yucatán,” *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 5, 1969.

69. “Remitido,” *El Diario de Yucatán*, August 1, 1969; “Manifiesto e inconformidad de padres de familia,” *El Diario de Yucatán*, August 8, 1969.

70. PISMA, “Detienen a líderes de normalistas yucatecos,” *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 16, 1969.

71. August 15, 1969, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 6/31, p 206 - 209.

72. PISMA, “Detienen a líderes de normalistas yucatecos.”

73. “Denuncias contra la policía del estado. Que atacó en la colonia Catilla Cámara a 5 estudiantes,” *El Diario de Yucatán*, August 24, 1969.

*Escuela Normal Rural de Rafael Ramírez (Santa Teresa), Coahuila*

At the Escuela Normal Rural Rafael Ramírez, authorities were also able to occupy the campus before students could do so. With the help of the governor, Héctor Fernández Aguirre, the 16<sup>th</sup> military regiment occupied the school and then handed over control to the police, led by commander Juan Manuel Cervantes.<sup>74</sup> Without access to their campus, students participated in an August 5 march in Torreón, the largest city near their campus.<sup>75</sup> In an interview with newspaper reporters, local campus leaders Armando Valenzuela, Porfirio Olivas, and Luis Herrera Martínez described their schools as something to which they had inherited, thereby implying that they had ownership or the right to decide what happened to the schools.<sup>76</sup> This description of the normales rurales as an inheritance was used in multiple declarations of the FECSM from this period.<sup>77</sup> The FECSM had always called on this social and political relationship with the schools as a position from which to request more resources, but in 1969 they used it to justify their right to demand the schools remain open.

The DFS reports from 1969 contain a number of specific instances of student arrests and explicit physical aggression. This is not to say that there are no such events in DFS records from before 1969, but rather that the visibility of the practice, even in the highly censored government documents, is greater in that year. Agents described the treatment of students in police or military custody by using words such as “admonished,” “interrogated,” and “threatened.” At Santa Teresa, for example, the military apprehended six students, including Antonio Quiroz Aguilera (16 years old), Jaime Ortega Córdoba (15), Agustín Franco Santillán (20), José Carmen García Bretado (18), Guadalupe García Delgado (14), and Daniel Calderón Carreón (17).<sup>78</sup> They were taken to the 6th military barracks, where they were “admonished” by an army general, Antonio Romero Romero.<sup>79</sup> According to reports, the students were then “put at the disposal” of police. Days later, on August 12, police kicked out five students who were sleeping in private homes in town.<sup>80</sup> The detaining of students by the army or the police before a rally was not unique to Santa

74. “Buscan apoyo para evitar que se cierre la Normal de Santa Teresa,” *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 5, 1969; July 29, 1969, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 6/31.

75. “Buscan apoyo para evitar que se cierre la Normal de Santa Teresa.”

76. “Buscan apoyo para evitar que se cierre la Normal de Santa Teresa.”

77. “En defensa de las normales rurales.”

78. August 6, 1969, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 5/31.

79. August 6, 1969, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 5/31.

80. “Declaraciones de los alumnos de Sta. Teresa,” *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 13, 1969; August 13, 1969, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 6/31.

Teresa. Rather, it was something that authorities did systematically across various campuses.

As these aggressions toward students took place, the state newspapers made it a point to highlight the viewpoint of education officials. The director of the SEP for Coahuila, Domingo Adame Vega, promised that the Santa Teresa campus would not close. He stated that, “[The school] is not condemned to disappear, nor are its students at risk of seeing their studies truncated, for the goals of the reorganization program . . . are far from pursuing such ends.”<sup>81</sup> Adame Vega also demanded that students not challenge the changes.<sup>82</sup> He warned both parents and students that if normalistas rurales continued to participate in protests, they would lose their scholarships and therefore their enrollment.<sup>83</sup> The threat reflected the hard-line approach taken by the SEP: the changes were not up for debate, and education officials were not to be lenient toward those who resisted.

Adame Vega’s warning that students might lose their scholarships was based on clear instructions from the SEP; it was not an empty threat. The SEP instructed the directors of both the new secondary schools and the normales rurales to provide assistance on September 3: if there were people on campus, students or teachers, who were not authorized to be there, directors were to inform them of their “absurd” decision to stay on campus and immediately send their names to the SEP. Then, if by September 4 there were still students who “maintained their rebellion,” the directors were to suspend all assistance services including “kitchen, cafeteria, dorms, labs, [and] offices.”<sup>84</sup> This happened at least on one campus, El Quinto, in Sonora. When students maintained their protests beyond the September 3 deadline, the authorities, determined to deter the strike, removed the potable water, stopped the buses, and cut off the campus electricity. As a final blow to the efforts of the El Quinto students, the SEP annulled all enrollments for the school year, sent students home, and began a new enrollment process the following month. It is unknown how many students from the original group were allowed to re-enroll.

Back at the Santa Teresa campus, in spite of the physical and verbal threats from authorities, and just one week before the enrollment process was set to begin, normalistas rurales created a permanent camp outside the federal building in Torreón. From August 21 to 26, students spent the night outside the building

81. “Sólo será reestructurada la Normal de Santa Teresa.” *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 6, 1969.

82. “Intentarán tomar subrepticamente escuelas normales rurales del país,” *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 7, 1969.

83. “Intentarán tomar subrepticamente escuelas normales rurales del país.”

84. Instrucciones para los CC. Directores de las Escuelas Técnicas Agropecuarias y Normales Rurales, AHENRSM, folder: diversos (1968-69).

in order to protest occupation of their schools and the adoption of the reform. Students told newspapers that they believed the real reason behind the reform was to break up their student federation.<sup>85</sup>

*Escuela Normal Rural de Rural de Miguel Hidalgo (Atequiza), Jalisco*

Unlike the Santa Teresa and the San Diego Tekax campuses, students at the all-female campus in Atequiza were able to enter and control the school before authorities got there. Under the reform, this campus would remain a normal rural, but would be converted to a campus for male students only. While it is unclear how the SEP decided which normales rurales to close, the decision to make this an all-male campus and therefore remove all of its original students, was most likely motivated by the active and militant organization of the Atequiza students in the years prior to the reform. From August 1 to 17, students and parents from Atequiza organized various meetings, letter-writing campaigns, and brigades to neighboring communities to look for support. For example, the group sent a letter to all of the parents of students from Atequiza, asking them to send letters to Agustín Yáñez, Ramón Bonfil Viveros, and Díaz Ordaz to express their rejection of the reform.

At Atequiza, as at some other campuses, authorities tried to use the Comité Administrador del Programa Federal de Construcción de Escuelas (CAPFCE), the federal program that oversaw school construction and repair, to help occupy the campuses. The idea was to use the CAPFCE workers on campus to justify keeping students out. For example, at the Ayotzinapa campus, the governor of Guerrero asked the CAPFCE representatives to write a letter requesting police protection while they worked on repairs so that he could better justify the strong presence of police.<sup>86</sup> At Atequiza, however, the normalistas rurales controlled the campus entrance, which meant they decided who was allowed inside the school gates. As a result, the CAPFCE workers were not given access.

Atequiza students lost control of the campus on August 17, when the majority of the students left to participate in a planned protest in Guadalajara. While police dressed as civilians detained students as they entered the city square in Guadalajara, back at the campus, 60 campesinos from the *comunidades agrarias* (agricultural community organizations aligned with the CNC), occupied the

85. "Alumnos de Santa Teresa en protesta permanente," *La Opinión de Coahuila*, August 26, 1969; August 26, 1969, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 63, leg. 7/31.

86. August 6, 1969, FECSM, vp, AGN-DFS, caja 62, leg. 5/31.

school. The role of the CNC in the implementation of the reform was not lost on students. The FECSM denounced the involvement of the CNC numerous times. It stated that, “In some cases, this intervention has been masked with deceived campesinos, who have been paid off by the CNC, and who with the protection of the police and army, have occupied our education centers.”<sup>87</sup> This was the case at Atequiza, and once the campesinos took over, CAPFCE representatives were allowed into the campus. On September 2, the new students assigned to Atequiza began to arrive and the campesinos who were occupying the school were asked to leave.

For most of the normales rurales, classes began in September, but the campus climate remained tense. Education officials made sure that students understood that the normales rurales were going to function under new disciplinary standards—the schools were not to return to previous practices. Students were not to regain the level of control that they previously had in the normales rurales. To begin with, police remained outside of the campuses for weeks. Further, SEP officials traveled to the various campuses to lecture students and staff about the new expectations. SEP inspector Victor Hugo Bolaños and SEP representative Jesús Caloca Ramírez, for example, went to Atequiza and lectured about the need for discipline and order.<sup>88</sup> Similar talks reportedly took place at Ayotzinapa and Santa Teresa. These lectures color and reinforce the memories that normalistas rurales have of this time of change: they recall aggressive post-reform disciplinary measures. Gabino, for example, described the atmosphere at his new campus as, “O se chingan, o se chingan, cabrones. They sent you here, and here you will be calm. We do not want chaos.”<sup>89</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Five years ago, the government did not disappear a group of schools, as it had in 1969. Instead, on September 26, 2014, it disappeared 43 normalistas rurales from the Escuela Normal Rural de Raúl Isidro Burgos in Guerrero (Ayotzinapa).<sup>90</sup> In the journalistic coverage of this tragedy, international and national reporters searched for historical context to help frame the violent episode, beyond the more recognizable circumstances of the contemporaneous violence related to

87. “En defensa de las normales rurales.”

88. Héctor Mayagoitia, head of the Dirección de Enseñanza Técnica within the SEP, visited Santa Teresa on September 10. He spoke with students and staff, stressing that the SEP expected discipline and order in the schools.

89. Gabino, “Nos tocó vivir la guerra sucia,” *Memorias Inquietas*, 98. His statement was meant to imply that students did not have an option; authorities were going to proceed in the way they saw fit, regardless of how students felt about it.

90. For a study of the events surrounding the missing Ayotzinapa students, see Anabel Hernández, *La verdadera noche de Iguala: la historia que el gobierno quiso ocultar* (Mexico City: Penguin Random House, 2016).



the poorly labeled War on Drugs. Some articles highlighted the trajectory of leftist normalistas rurales and rural teachers turned armed militant leaders, such as Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vázquez. Other reporters pointed to the 1968 government massacre of students in Mexico City to argue that there was a precedent to the government's killing of students.

While these events are all part of the background story, the details of the 1969 education reform, and the ways in which authorities implemented it, contribute to a more nuanced view of this historical puzzle. In 1969, the government used an education reform, supported by physical force, as a tool to limit student autonomy and power within the normales rurales. The events in 1969 are just one snapshot of a long trajectory of contentious battles between these schools and various branches of the government. Another example was that of the El Mexe campus in the state of Hidalgo, which the government violently closed down in 2008. The Ayotzinapa case understandably received a lot of attention from journalists and the general public, but the government attacks against normalistas rurales have been continuous—and they are ongoing.

In 1969, the anxieties regarding the political practices of normalistas rurales, within the context of the political polarization of the Cold War period, motivated the creation and implementation of the education reform. Because of the cooperation between agencies such as the SEP, the DFS, local police, and the military, the government was able to implement the reform the way it did. As such, the SEP was central to the employment of authoritarian politics against students in Mexico. The particularities of state repression in the normales rurales were linked to the social and political position of these schools. They were locations where student politics, rural politics, and education all overlapped. Consequently, the schools experienced mixed tactics of repression, as highlighted by the government's use of both student and campesino corporatist groups.<sup>91</sup>

The SEP accomplished a number of its objectives. First, the government decreased the number of normales rurales across the country. Students were never able to recover the schools that were closed in 1969. Second, the new secondary schools corresponded with the joint economic and educational objectives of the government. Investing in agricultural-technical schools supported the notion that the betterment of both campesinos and the country depended on diversified secondary and vocational education systems.<sup>92</sup> Third, authorities

91. For an analysis of repression in rural Mexico, see Gladys I. McCormick, *The Logic of Compromise in Mexico: How the Countryside was Key to the Emergence of Authoritarianism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

92. Olga Moreno, "Apoyo al programa de reformas para la Escuela Normal Rural," *El Heraldo de México*, August 6, 1969.

within the normales rurales were able to challenge and reorganize the power dynamics within the schools. With the local student associations and the FECSM in disarray, school authorities in particular, and state agents in general, created a new environment of fear within the schools that set the tone for the disciplinary expectations of the years that followed. The goal of the reform was to undermine and eradicate student activism, which was considered to be a product of the FECSM, and which thrived within the structure and environment of the normales rurales. It was not until 1972 that students reorganized the FECSM and the local student associations.

In 1969, the points between which the SEP and the FECSM could negotiate essentially disappeared. The arguments of the two groups were constructed from contradictory visions of the importance of the normales rurales. While both the SEP and the FECSM reproduced elements of official discourse and drew from them arguments regarding the importance of the post-Revolution reforms for the normales rurales, they diverged on the particulars. Decades detached from the revolution and in the middle of the Cold War, the normales rurales were envisioned in distinct ways. While SEP officials spoke of the privilege of attending the normales rurales, teacher professionalization, and the diversification of education, the FECSM spoke of the schools as a national inheritance and a key component of a much needed independent campesino movement. For the FECSM, the schools were not just a path to a career—they were institutions of the community. Education officials presented the schools as a privilege for those who fell in line, while the FECSM continued to maintain that rural communities had a right to education.

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