

Biddy as a Schoolteacher: The Prevalence of Teaching Jobs for Women in Charles Dickens's Novels

Akiko Takei, Chukyo University, Japan

The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2025
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study analyses the social, cultural, and educational factors that affected female teachers during Charles Dickens's lifetime (1812–70) by examining the prevalence of jobs for women in Dickens's novels through Bidley's teaching career in *Great Expectations* (1860–61). In Dickens's studies, critics have not paid much attention to Bidley's character and history. However, analyses of Bidley's becoming a schoolteacher are significant because this job was a new profession that began to gradually emerge during Dickens's time. For Victorian middle-class women, teaching was the only means to earn a living without losing their social standing. This livelihood was also gradually adopted by their lower-middle-class and upper-working-class counterparts thanks to the pupil-teacher system. This system was formally introduced in Britain in 1846 by James Kay-Shuttleworth (1804–77) to improve teaching quality and secure highly skilled teachers. Shuttleworth's reforms had a significant impact on Dickens's fictional schools and teachers. Although most of these descriptions were negative, one exception was Bidley's work as a schoolteacher, which Dickens described favourably. By focusing on Bidley's qualifications as a teacher, the current study illustrates her development as well as the opportunities for income and independence that were available to ordinary lower-middle-class women.

Keywords: Charles Dickens, class, education, gender, James Kay-Shuttleworth, the pupil-teacher system

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Introduction

This study analyses the social, cultural, and educational factors that affected female teachers during Charles Dickens's lifetime (1812–70) by focusing on Bidley's teaching career in *Great Expectations* (1860–61). In Dickens's studies, Bidley is seen as gentle and modest, worthy of being an angel in the house, but boring compared to Estella's outstanding beauty and strong mind. Micheal Slater says that Bidley's virtue is important in *Great Expectations* but too minor for her to gain readers' love and admiration (282). Peter Scheckner also says that Bidley is virtuous but uninteresting, like many of Dickens's virtuous women (237). Critics have not paid much attention to Bidley's character and history. However, analyses of Bidley's becoming a schoolteacher are significant because this job was a new profession that began to gradually emerge during Dickens's time. Bidley's choice of a teaching job echoes the start of national involvement in children's education and the pupil-teacher system, which enabled bright but needy lower-middle-class children to earn a decent living. Although most of Dickens's descriptions of schoolteachers were negative, one exception was Bidley's work as a teacher, which Dickens described favourably. Despite being a short time, Bidley's independence shows the possibility of a career path for Victorian lower-middle-class women.

Bidley's suitability for a teacher is presented as early as her childhood when she teaches Pip. Later, he esteems her quick understanding and good memory: he says, "you are very clever" (ch.17, 110);

...she was equally accomplished in the terms of our trade, and the names of our different sorts of work, and our various tools. In short, whatever I knew, Bidley knew. Theoretically, she was already as good a blacksmith as I, or better. (ch.17, 111)

However, it takes long periods of time for her to become a teacher. After being released from Mrs. Joe's care for several years, she announces her desire to become a schoolteacher for the first time in the scene below:

'How am I going to live?' repeated Bidley, striking in, with a momentary flush upon her face. 'I'll tell you, Mr. Pip. I am going to try to get the place of mistress in the new school nearly finished here. I can be well recommended by all the neighbours, and I hope I can be industrious and patient, and teach myself while I teach others. You know, Mr. Pip,' pursued Bidley, with a smile, as she raised her eyes to my face, 'the new schools are not like the old, but I learnt a good deal from you after that time, and have had time since then to improve. (ch.35, 252)

Jerome Meckier argues that *Great Expectations* is set between 1805 and 1830 (158), although the actions and events do not necessarily correspond to actual dates (186); for instance, the phrase "universal struggle" in Chapter 1 (2) is a reference to the title of Chapter 3 (Struggle for Existence) of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Bidley's remarks, "teach myself while I teach others" and "the new schools are not like the old," possibly point to the period after the introduction of the pupil-teacher system in 1846. After this scene, Bidley is absent until nearly the end of the book and the details of her life as a teacher remain unclear. However, her untold history parallels the realities of schools and education for working-class children and the increasing possibility of lower-middle-class women in Dickens's lifetime.

Unregulated Education and Schooling Before the Mid-1840s

Before the 1846 introduction of the pupil-teacher system—the age of “old schools,” as Bidy puts it—education for middle- and working-class children was a mix of private entrepreneurship, charity, and ad hoc trials. The school system was deeply stratified according to class, sex, and location (British History Online), and education for the working-class and pauper children was difficult. Table 1 presents these school types below.

Table 1

School Systems Prior to the Establishment of the Pupil-Teacher System

Type	Description
Dame school	- Run by elderly women at their home - Basic literacy; small fee
Sunday school	- Basic secular and religious education, part-time - Popular until the mid-nineteenth century
Charity school	- Run by Anglican church or nonconformist church
Ragged school	- Emerged in the 1840s - Free food and clothing
Industrial school	- Existed in urban slums - Emphasis on industrial training
Workhouse school	- Minimal education for pauper children - Understaffed, overcrowded

Source: Picard, Waite, Larsen ch.6, 108

Except for the dame schools, these schools were run by charity or philanthropic organisations with no tuition fees, and the standards of the curriculum were low. The lessons comprised basic learning, including reading, writing, arithmetic, and religious instruction. Teachers relied on rote memorisation and repetition with the help of physical punishment. Facilities were poorly built and unhealthy. In *Household Words* issued on 13 March 1852, Dickens wrote of his first visiting Field Lane Ragged School on 14 September 1843: “It was held in a low-roofed den, in a sickening atmosphere, in the midst of taint, and dirt, and pestilence: with all the deadly sins let loose, howling and shrieking at the doors” (*A Sleep to Startle Us*, 577).

Reflecting the horrible working environment, the social standing of schoolteachers before 1846 was quite low. They were incompetent and untrained: Dickens wrote, “Zeal did not supply the place of method and training; the teachers knew little of their office.” (*A Sleep to Startle Us*, 577). They employed the Lancaster System: older or brighter pupils taught their younger and less brighter counterparts. This system lowered teaching costs, but untrained pupils were unable to do much (Picard). Female teachers were common, especially in charity and dame schools, because teaching was practically the only option for Victorian middle-class women to earn a livelihood without losing their social standing. Christina de Bellaigue mentions, “Teaching, as an extension of the maternal role, was the only occupation of a middle-class woman could adopt without losing caste” (43). However, they were paid less than male teachers and expected to quit upon marriage.

From the 1830s, national involvement in education increased. For instance, in 1833, the first government grant (£20,000) was awarded to church-run schools. In 1839, the Committee of the Privy Council on Education was established to oversee grants and inspections. However, these implementations did not work sufficiently to improve the condition of education for the working class and poor. The curriculum and teaching methods were unregulated and unsystematic, without national standards, structured training, or mandatory inspection.

James Kay-Shuttleworth's Reform and the Start of the Pupil-Teacher System (1846)

Education reform in the Victorian era was impossible without James Kay-Shuttleworth (1804–77). Working as a physician in the Manchester slums during the 1832 cholera epidemic, he faced the harsh realities of the urban poor (Ronson) and developed his sense of social justice. His 1832 work *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* was an excellent social investigation before Friedrich Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845).

After the 1832 publication, Shuttleworth turned to public service. In 1835, he became an Assistant Poor Law Commissioner to implement the controversial 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. After his observations on pauper children, he believed that every child, regardless of their origin, should have the right to live decently, and through proper education, their life could be improved. He wrote in "Report on the Training of Pauper Children" (1838) as follows:

A child should not be degraded in his own estimation by being a member of a despised class. A child cannot be a pauper in the sense in which that term is commonly understood that is, he cannot be indigent as the consequence of his own want of industry, skill, frugality, or gent as the consequence of his own want of industry, skill, frugality, or forethought, and he ought not therefore to be taught to despise himself. (237)

In mingling various kinds of industrial instruction with the plan of training pursued in the model-school, it is not proposed to prepare the children for some particular trade or art, so as to supersede the necessity for further instruction ; it is chiefly intended that the practical lesson, that they are destined to earn their livelihood by the sweat of their brow, shall be inculcated; to teach them the use of various tools, so that they may be enabled to increase the comfort of their own households by the skill which they have acquired, or to obtain a greater reward for their labour by superior usefulness. (240)

Shuttleworth's idea on pauper children was not just sentimental sympathy for them; he aimed to prevent them from committing crimes and train them to become skilled workers based on utilitarianism. In 1839, Shuttleworth was appointed the first Secretary to the Committee of the Privy Council on Education and engaged in a variety of education reforms, including co-founding England's first teacher training college, St. John's College, Battersea (1840); the introduction of the pupil-teacher system (1846); and the start of school inspections. In this study, the details of the pupil-teacher system are examined.

The pupil-teacher system was modelled on Dutch schools and initially aimed to solve deficiencies of the monitoring system, where older and smarter pupils taught their younger and less smarter counterparts. Shuttleworth wrote as follows:

In the first volume of [1846] Minutes published by the Committee of Council on Education, indications had been given of the first steps to be taken in the removal of these evils. Public attention was there called to the peculiarities of the organization of Dutch Schools, and to the funds annually expended in their support. This system consisted in the apprenticeship to the Master of the school of the most advanced scholars, who, from the ages of thirteen to eighteen, assisted him as Pupil Teachers

during the day-time. The population in Holland is chiefly assembled in towns and large villages, and the Pupil Teachers are instructed in the evenings, by an association of the Masters of each town. Each Master selects one or two subjects of instruction with which he is most familiar, and conducts the education of the apprentices on the evenings devoted to those subjects; while other Masters in like manner take charge of it on other evenings. The Pupil Teachers are thus prepared, not only for the management of the classes confided to them in the elementary school, but for the periodical examinations of the public Inspector, by the results of which, and of the certificates delivered to them, the amount of their annual stipends is determined. They thus obtain progressive diplomas, each of which is necessary to their entrance on the more responsible discharge of the duties of their profession.

At length they attain the rank of Assistant-Master, but, in this stage, they continue to aid in the management and instruction of the school. When they have attained a certain rank, they proceed to Haarlem, there to complete their studies, and their acquaintance with the principles and methods of teaching, and they become entitled, when they have secured the diploma of Master, to an appointment to the charge of a public school, according to their proficiency and skill. (*Public Education*, 58–59)

At the start of the pupil-teacher system, teachers came from households of small-sized shopkeepers, farmers, and upper servants, and the profession eventually became popular among the lower middle class and upper working class. Their pay was as low as ordinary child workers' earnings, and they were paid once at the end of the year on the condition that their academic achievement was excellent (Bischof 50–51). Dickens's fictional teachers, such as Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), would have had difficulty becoming fully qualified teachers because they come from the underclass.

A model case of a pupil-teacher was as follows (Robinson 21–22):

- Applicant: Bright pupils (usually the age of thirteen) were selected. Under the supervision of a head teacher, they taught younger pupils in elementary school while continuing their secondary education.
- Apprenticeship: They received instruction from supervisors and accumulated teaching experience for five years.
- Progression: After the apprenticeship, successful pupil-teachers could take the Queen's Scholarship Exam. With a scholarship, they entered teacher training colleges such as St. Johns College and became certified teachers. Others may become assistant teachers without certification.

Shuttleworth's reforms were welcomed by schoolteachers as pupil-teachers decreased their burden, enabling them to improve their teaching. Certificates issued by training colleges guaranteed the qualifications of the graduates and made job hunting possible without relying on patronage. Although the path to elementary school teachers was equally open to both sexes (Bischof 24–27), the gender gap in teachers' salary was never solved (Bischof 53). Nevertheless, Shuttleworth's reforms foreshadow today's equal opportunities.

Dickens's Schools and Teachers vs Shuttleworth's Reforms

The early Victorian laissez-faire education and Shuttleworth's reforms cast a long, complex shadow on Dickens's portrayals of teachers and schools. Table 2 presents the schools in Dickens' works.

Table 2

Dickensian Counterparts of School Types

School type	Features	Dickensian counterparts	Portrayal and critique
Boarding school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For middle-class boys - Classical curriculum; harsh discipline 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dotheboys Hall (NN) - Salem House (DC) 	Brutal and exploitative; ripe with abuse and neglect.
Finishing school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For upper-class girls - Manners and social graces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Minerva House (SB) 	Superficial and ineffective. Girls learn nothing substantial.
Utilitarian/State-Influenced School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emphasis on facts and numbers (the post-1840s reforms) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gradgrind's school (HT) 	Satirical and chilling. Teaching was very mechanical and students receive emotional damage.
Dame school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informal, home-based; run by elderly women - Basic literacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Biddy's grandmother's school (GE) 	Incompetent teachers and chaotic classrooms.
Charity school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Church-run - Moral and religious instruction for the poor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schools attended by Noah Claypole (OT) and Uriah Heep (DC) 	Despised by the better-off. Pupils internalize a sense of inferiority.
Ragged school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free education for destitute children; food and clothing provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Charley Hexam's first school (OMF) 	Dickens admires their mission but notes their limitations.

Note. SB: *The Sketches by Boz*; OT: *Oliver Twist*; NN: *Nicholas Nickleby*; DC: *David Copperfield*; HT: *Hard Times*; GE: *Great Expectations*; OMF: *Our Mutual Friend*

Table 3 shows the teachers depicted in Dickens's works and their symbolic functions.

Table 3

Symbolic Functions of Dickensian Teachers

Character	Role	Symbolic function	Dickens's commentary
Miss Crumptions (SB)	Headmistresses of Minerva House	Superficial social grooming	Superficial upper-class female education
Wackford Squeers (NN)	Headmaster of Dotheboys Hall	Corruption, cruelty	Abuse and moneymaking, modelled on William Shaw
Cornelia Blimber (DS)	Teacher of her father Dr Blimber's school	Over-cramming education	Unpractical classical education
Esther Summerson (BH)	Resident teacher of Greenleaf House	Affection	Emotional labour and quiet strength
Thomas Gradgrind (HT)	Headmaster and MP	Utilitarianism	Overemphasis on fact and numbers
Mr. and Mrs. M'Choakumchild (HT)	Teachers of Gradgrind's school	Product of the pupil-teacher system and training colleges	Rote memorization
Biddy's grandmother (GE)	Runs a village school	Ignorance, incompetence	Chaotic, unregulated rural education
Biddy (GE)	Teacher of her grandmother's school and the village school	Moral clarity and emotional intelligence	Self-teaching, sincerity
Bradley Headstone (OMF)	Ragged school teacher	Social mobility	Sense of inferiority
Charley Hexam (OMF)	Ragged school pupil → pupil-teacher → teacher	Social mobility	Arrogance toward those regarded as below him, including his sibling
Emma Peecher (OMF)	Headstone's colleague	Respectability, repression	Repressed femininity

Note. SB: *The Sketches by Boz*; NN: *Nicholas Nickleby*; DS: *Dombey and Son*; DC: *David Copperfield*; BH: *Bleak House*; HT: *Hard Times*; GE: *Great Expectations*; OMF: *Our Mutual Friend*

These tables reveal Dickens's depiction of the flaws and limitations of the contemporary schools and teachers. He strongly disagreed with abuse and neglect in unregulated or profit-driven schools and the low standards and useless curricula of schools. As is evident in the cases of Bradley Headstone and Charley Hexam, Dickens was fully aware of the potential social advancement brought about by education; however, he was deeply sceptical of its mechanised execution, as seen in the cases of Cornelia Blimber and Mr. Gradgrind. His fiction reflects both agreement and disagreement with Shuttleworth's vision.

Biddy and the Gendered Pedagogies of *Great Expectations*

Dickens's representations of schools and teachers were mostly negative and critical, illustrating chaotic conditions without proper control and regulation. However, representation of Biddy's teaching was exceptionally positive. Biddy's station shows the reality of a common lower-middle-class woman without a helpful supporter or guardian; she must sacrifice her comfort and pleasure to fulfil society's silent pressure on women.

Biddy's background is as humble as Pip's. She puts up with an abusive grandmother and does not receive the affection and support young children need. When Pip meets Biddy for the first time, he says, "her hair always wanted brushing, her hands always wanted washing, and her shoes always wanted mending and pulling up at heel" (ch.7, 37). Her poor clothing demonstrates that she has been neglected. She forms a penchant for self-sacrifice during her childhood; and she feels constantly compelled to run the school and grocery shop while her grandmother does nothing.

In Chapter 10, the details of Biddy's grandmother's school, a dame school, are represented. This school is one of the worst schools in Dickens's fiction. He pokes fun at the state of rural education in the following scene:

The Educational scheme or Course established by Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt may be resolved into the following synopsis. The pupils ate apples and put straws up one another's backs, until Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt collected her energies, and made an indiscriminate totter at them with a birch-rod. After receiving the charge with every mark of derision, the pupils formed in line and buzzingly passed a ragged book from hand to hand. The book had an alphabet in it, some figures and tables, and a little spelling—that is to say, it had had once. As soon as this volume began to circulate, Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt fell into a state of coma, arising either from sleep or a rheumatic paroxysm. The pupils then entered among themselves upon a competitive examination on the subject of Boots, with the view of ascertaining who could tread the hardest upon whose toes. This mental exercise lasted until Biddy made a rush at them and distributed three defaced Bibles (shaped as if they had been unskillfully cut off the chump-end of something), more illegibly printed at the best than any curiosities of literature I have since met with, speckled all over with ironmould, and having various specimens of the insect world smashed between their leaves. This part of the Course was usually lightened by several single combats between Biddy and refractory students. When the fights were over, Biddy gave out the number of a page, and then we all read aloud what we could—or what we couldn't—in a frightful chorus; Biddy leading with a high, shrill, monotonous voice, and none of us having the least notion of, or reverence for, what we were reading about. When this horrible din had lasted a certain time, it mechanically awoke Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt, who staggered at a boy fortuitously, and pulled his ears. This was understood to terminate the Course for the evening, and we emerged into the air with shrieks of intellectual victory. It is fair to remark that there was no prohibition against any pupil's entertaining himself with a slate or even with the ink (when there was any), but that it was not easy to pursue that branch of study in the winter season, on account of the little general shop in which the classes were holden—and which was also Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt's sitting-room and bed-chamber—being but faintly illuminated through the agency of one low-spirited dip-candle and no snuffers. (ch.10, 62–63)

Dickens uses this scene to criticize the state of rural education. Examples of low-standard teaching and bad school facilities are presented: the pupils are eating, fighting, and do not understand what they are studying; the teacher relies on physical punishment and starts sleeping; Biddy just performs mechanical repetition; and textbooks are unclean and worn out. This description is similar with Dickens's portrayal of Field Lane Ragged School, where he wrote,

...the teachers knew little of their office; the pupils, with an evil sharpness, found them out, got the better of them, derided them, made blasphemous answers to scriptural questions, sang, fought, danced, robbed one another; seemed possessed by legions of devils. The place was stormed and carried, over and over again; the lights were blown out, the books strewn in the gutters, and the female scholars carried off triumphantly to their old wickedness. (*A Sleep to Startle Us*, 577)

It is far from the structured, state-sponsored education reforms that Shuttleworth aimed for; it is comical but an example of what education should not be. This scene also underscores Pip's humble upbringing and unequal opportunities to learn based on class and location.

Biddy's burden continues even after her grandmother's death. Instead of starting her own life, she takes charge of nursing the paralysed Mrs. Joe for several years. In *Great Expectations*, the female characters are strictly confined to the home and domestic spheres, aligning with the Victorian gendered society (Brunt). For instance, Miss Havisham shuts herself in Satis House; Mrs. Joe is bedridden until her death; Biddy never leaves her home village. Uzma Nikhat also notes that "the woman folk of the Victorian era were oppressed as they were confined to the domestic spheres for rearing children and household chores and were not welcomed in the masculine public domain of politics and business" (542). No school exists in the neighbourhood; thus, Biddy cannot start teaching training anywhere else. Possibly because of love for Pip, she chooses an unpaid and exhausting job and gives up her ambitions. Amada observes the theory of the gendered capitalist society:

Biddy, although being a woman herself, has assimilated the belief that women are objects or acquisitions to be obtained by males. A woman's value is contingent upon her contributions to a man. If she is unable to provide him with the necessary support to enhance his productivity within the capitalist society, her value diminishes. (6)

Therefore, both Pip and Joe take her dedication and sacrifice for granted and do not care about her burden at all. Biddy's penchant for self-sacrifice and Pip's and Joe's lack of awareness exhibit the gender roles in Victorian society. Scheckner writes that Dickens believed that both genders had different natures—men's was violent, women's was healing—and Biddy's role in *Great Expectations* was healing (237). Joe may have been too worried about Mrs. Joe to understand others' feelings and sentiments. On the other hand, Pip's attitude toward Biddy is clearly exploitive. First, in spite of being aware of her love, he professes to her his love for Estella: "I admire her dreadfully" (ch.17, 114). Next, after Mrs. Joe's death, he censures Biddy for not writing about it immediately, despite his own neglect: "I think you might have written to me about these sad matters" (ch.35, 251). He then assumes that she is always available whenever he needs her; therefore, after his inheritance fails, he returns to his village to propose to her without confirming her feelings. David Holbrook points out Pip's arrogance in this action (143): Pip depends heavily on Biddy without fully appreciating the burden she is carrying, which reflects the Victorian culture in which women's dedications were taken for granted.

In Chapter 35 of *Great Expectations*, Bidley is supposed to be twenty or twenty-one years old (Meckier 160, 175), too old to start as a pupil-teacher or a training college student. While Dickens does not write about the process of Bidley's becoming a schoolteacher at all, there are a few plausible explanations which enable her to become a teacher, even though she does not finish training college. First, Bidley's good reputation in her village works; she says, "I can be well recommended by all the neighbours" (ch.35, 252). This remark suggests that local connection was helpful in teaching job hunting. Bischof points out that there was a preference and favouritism for an applicant with local connections in hiring teachers (114, 122), and that teachers did not always finish a training college with a certificate. Robinson says, "Not all pupil teachers were formally trained and certificated and many teachers in elementary schools worked as uncertificated assistants" (22). Under these conditions, becoming a schoolteacher is possible for Bidley even though she does not attend a training college. Katie Krauskopf says that by giving Bidley a teaching job, Dickens describes her as an intelligent woman, as well as a good housekeeper and nurse (Krauskopf). Her becoming a teacher reflects not just her skills but also a social recognition of her worth, which Pip ignores while he is in love with Estella.

Conclusion

After being in pain and servitude for a considerable period, Bidley is allowed to pursue her own social aspirations. In Dickens's novels, Bidley is the only female teacher who is described positively. However, her work as a teacher is never presented. Dickens seems to regard teaching as a means of her earning a living until her marriage, and to think that she should quit teaching upon marriage. After disappearing in Chapter 35, she is absent until Chapter 57, where she appears as Joe's bride. Thereafter, she is portrayed as content with her role as a wife and mother, with no indication that she will resume teaching. Krauskopf states that the closed school on Joe and Bidley's wedding day represents the end of her teaching career (Krauskopf). Bidley's short-term independence after the long-term delay likely reflects the Victorian social pressure that the women's sphere is home, not schoolrooms. There was "taboo against married women's work" (De Bellaigue 43) in the Victorian culture. Scheckner also points out, "Dickens wrote as if he believed a woman's place was mostly in the home, doing domestic things and supporting her husband" (240). In Dickens's world, teaching is not what women should pursue all their lives. Bidley's life reflects the limited trajectories available to lower-middle-class women in Dickens's world: she is helpful but undervalued, virtuous yet confined, and her modest aspirations align with societal expectations rather than personal ambition.

Acknowledgement

This study was supported by JSPS KAKENHI (grant number: JP124K03738).

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