

Tool 5

Teaching strategy: object biography

An early 20th-century *vardo*



TOOLKIT FOR TEACHING ROMA AND/OR TRAVELLER HISTORY

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The following activity overview is based on the EuroClio teaching strategy "Using object biographies to reveal how our pasts are interconnected", developed by Elisabete Pereira.

An object biography – a collection of sources on how an object was created, who has owned it, and where it has been used and kept – reveals otherwise overlooked historical actors and introduces new historical perspectives.

The term "Roma and Travellers" is used at the Council of Europe to encompass the wide diversity of the groups covered by the work of the Council of Europe in this field: on the one hand a) Roma, Sinti/Manush, Calé, Kaale, Romanichals, Boyash/Rudari; b) Balkan Egyptians (Egyptians and Ashkali); c) Eastern groups (Dom, Lom and Abdal); and, on the other hand, groups such as Travellers, Yenish, and the populations designated under the administrative term "Gens du voyage", as well as persons who identify themselves as Gypsies. The present is an explanatory footnote, not a definition of Roma and/or Travellers.

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1. Historical background of the *vardo*

*Jel on, me dad would say.
The cuckoo's callin', untie the grai,
up onto the vardo. It's a kushti day.¹*

R. Geoghegan (2019),
"Koring Chiriclo II – A triolet"

For many, the horse-drawn caravan, or *vardo* (meaning "living wagon" in Romani), has become synonymous with Roma and Traveller communities in Britain and Ireland. Roma communities have lived in the British Isles since approximately the 16th century. Although they are often described as the first immigrants to the United Kingdom and Ireland who followed a nomadic lifestyle, there is a long history of Scottish and Irish nomadic people in the region.

The roots of Scottish and Irish Traveller groups can be traced back centuries. References to Scottish Travellers date back as far as the 12th century. Furthermore, the dialects used by Scottish Travellers contain old Gaelic, indicating lines of descent from the ancient Scots. Other words have been taken from the Romani language, which demonstrates intermingling between the two groups as they travelled the region over time. The language of Irish Travellers, known as Shelta, suggests that they are descended in part from an ethnic group that predates the arrival of the Celts into Ireland in the 6th century BCE. Irish Travellers, also known as *Mincéirí*, then intermarried with an array of other groups that had turned to a nomadic way of life, such as those who were left homeless after Oliver Cromwell seized their land in the 17th century in order to establish the plantation system in Ireland, or those fleeing the potato famine in the 19th century (Dave and O'Grady 2019).

To summarise, those who trace their lineage to the migrations stemming from north-western India in the early medieval period are often termed "Roma" in mainland Europe and "Romani" (or "Romany") in England, Ireland and Wales. However, Scottish and Irish Travellers claim a different, Indigenous, heritage (Taylor and Hinks 2021). Although the strong cultural and occupational traditions connected to mobility sets Roma and Traveller communities apart from the settled population, there is little to suggest a common ancestry across all of the distinct groups.

However, the *vardo* has come to represent a romanticised and unifying symbol of the Roma and Traveller communities, especially in the British Isles. As Yaron Matras (2014) argues, many people in Europe and the Americas associate the idea of Travellers with the creative, the liberating, the norm-breaking, the passionate and the exotic. Many also connect the concept of Travellers to the romance of travelling and the outdoor life. Matras argues that most Europeans and Americans know more about the Roma and Traveller communities from portrayals in songs, stories and films than from real-life encounters: "So entrenched is our fictional image of Gypsies that we often brush aside real-world experiences as a mirage when they contradict the picture that we have absorbed or internalized" (Ibid., p. 5). By analysing the *vardo*, students can learn a great deal about the history of these groups and how Roma and Traveller communities continue to evolve today.

The image of the *vardo* as the symbol of Roma and Traveller communities is explicitly linked to their connection with cultural nomadism across Roma and Traveller communities (Kabachnik 2009). However, *vardos* are a relatively recent phenomena in the history of these groups. Previously, Roma and Traveller families would often sleep in "bender tents". A bender tent was a rounded structure made of bent saplings tied into a cylindrical dome and covered with a canvas or greased blankets to keep out the rain (Keet-Black 2013).

1. Geoghegan (2019), *Jel on* = move on; *grai* = horses; *vardo* = wagons; *kushti* = lovely.

Roma communities, as well as other nomadic groups, lived in wagons across Europe. For example, *vardos* have been bought and sold in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Holland and France (Le Bas 2018), but it was in Victorian England that the art of wagon-making reached its peak.

The first wagons were simply bender tents secured on top of wheeled carts to keep them off the cold, wet ground (Ibid.). Evidence of more elaborate vardos in Britain began to emerge in the 19th century. Some (Lemke 2006) argue that the Traveller caravan evolved from the Burton wagon, which was used by showmen and circus people in the mid-19th century (Figure 1). However, the small wheels of the Burton wagon did not allow for easy travel over fields or rough rural terrain, so larger wheels were used for Roma and Traveller wagons.

Early Roma and Traveller living wagons were quite basic, functionality being of prime importance. For example, the brush-type wagon was made with external racks and rails for storing and displaying the brooms, brushes and baskets that were sold. The living wagons evolved quickly, and in the emerging market wheelwrights and carpenters competed to create the most exquisite wagons. Over time, the design of these wagons became increasingly elaborate.

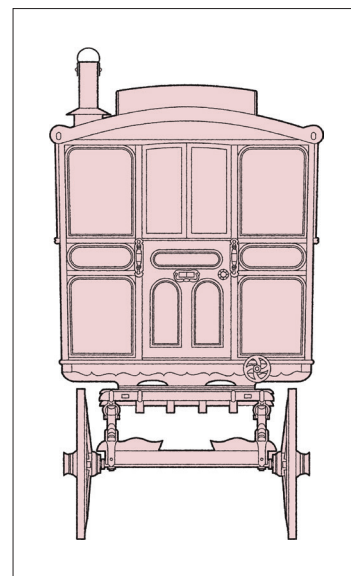


Figure 1: Burton wagon

Source: Salford City Council (n.d.).

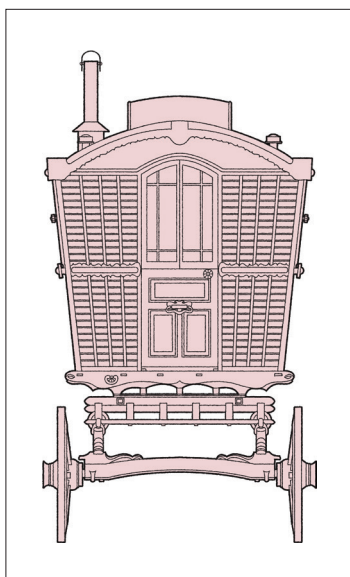


Figure 2: Reading wagon

Source: Salford City Council (n.d.).

There are altogether six main styles of the more sophisticated Roma and Traveller living wagons: open-lot, ledge, pot-cart, Reading, bow-top and Burton. One of the most popular types was the Reading wagon, named after the British town where it was invented (Figure 2). The Reading wagon had a box-like structure with high, flat wooden sides that made the interior more roomy. Wagons could incorporate ornate cut-glass and hand-etched mirrors, elaborate carvings, colourful paintwork and striking ceiling upholstery. Traditional Traveller and Romani symbols such as flowers, horses, vines, grapes and pears are often incorporated into the design of wagons. They could be fitted with gas lanterns and wrought-iron stoves, and some were even gilded with gold leaf.

Another popular wagon type was the bow-top wagon (Figure 3). The bow top was notable for its lightness and its reduced susceptibility to tipping over in strong winds. Its design features a lightweight canvas top upheld by a wooden frame, reminiscent of the traditional bender tents. The wagon's rear and front walls were adorned with scrollwork and tongue-and-groove woodwork, and the rounded canvas roof was typically green so as to blend with fields and forested areas.

Constructing a *vardo* typically required six months to a year, and they were frequently commissioned for recently married couples. A basic living wagon would have cost approximately £70 in 1904, which is roughly equivalent to €2250 in 2024. The cost could be significantly higher, depending on the materials used, the sophistication of interior features and the level of decorative accents. The layout for the interior of the wagon was generally consistent. Sleeping quarters, occupying one section of the *vardo*, featured an elevated bed and carpeting. Adults would sleep in a double berth, while children had a single berth beneath it or slept in tents attached to the exterior of the caravan. The remaining half of the *vardo* functioned as a kitchen, complete with a stove whose chimney extended through the roof. Many of the Reading wagons also housed a pantry, multiple chests, a sizeable water container, and various cooking utensils and crockery hung on the walls.

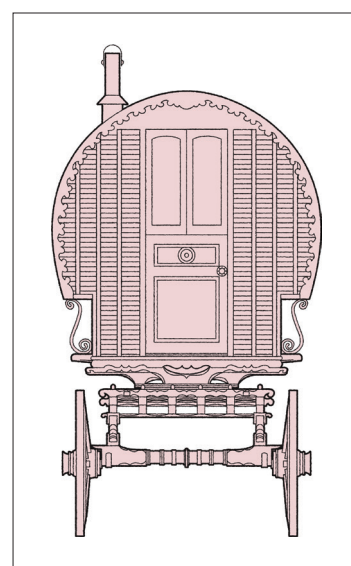


Figure 3: Bow-top wagon

Source: Salford City Council (n.d.).

The Roma and Travellers maintained a symbiotic economic and social connection with rural communities throughout the British Isles well into the 20th century. They engaged in trade, exchanging goods and services for payment, as well as participating in barter and occasionally securing temporary accommodation in return. Historical records reveal a diverse array of items traded, ranging from pots, pans and crockery to jewellery, textiles, flowers, camphor, clothes, pins, needles, nails, laces, carpets, mats, wooden toys, dolls, soaps, perfumes and various other household goods.

Some Roma and Travellers were not only retailers but also skilled metalworkers, who went beyond repairing and forging tin goods to maintaining essential machinery such as ploughs. Many also played a crucial role as temporary farm labourers during the harvest season and traded mules, horses, donkeys, goats and sheep. Travellers were especially revered for their expertise in horses. Women would frequently offer fortune-telling and busk as musicians and storytellers at local fairs (Dave and O'Grady 2019). However, most of these occupations are no longer economically viable, and the *vardo* no longer represents an authentic Traveller dwelling. Just as forms of mobile dwellings have evolved, so have the ways of life of Roma and Traveller communities.

In the second half of the 20th century, a shift in many western European countries saw initiatives of forced assimilation being imposed on Roma and Traveller communities that prevented them from continuing a nomadic way of life, and involved systematic discrimination in terms of access to services and public spaces, most notably in relation to accommodation. In a capitalist society, space has become a commodity, resulting in unequal access to it. Space is usually managed by those with political and economic power in a region, and generally according to an ethos of immobility, with the consequent vilification of groups that challenge this dominant view (Piazza 2021). Sadly, long-term caravan-based accommodation sites have been criminalised by successive British and Irish governments over the past three decades, which have also imposed stricter penalties for violations (Parnell-Berry 2019).

These policy practices have constructed a discriminatory Roma and Traveller identity, which prevents effective, fair and respectful policy making in terms of social and economic inclusion and accommodation provision for individuals and families. By being placed outside mainstream society and culture, and having their distinct cultures and histories not acknowledged, these communities are too often viewed simply as a disturbance of the social norm and are subjected to increased levels of policing and eviction. Roma and Travellers across the British Isles now reside in several types of accommodation including official halting sites, unofficial halting sites, group housing schemes, local authority housing, private rented accommodation and their own private property (Harvey 2021). Very few individuals live permanently in wagons today. For example, according to recent records in Ireland, only two Travellers, an elderly couple from Cashel, Co. Tipperary, continue to live in a barrel top wagon on a permanent basis (Warde 2022).

To many in Roma and Traveller communities, the beautifully decorated and elaborately designed *vardo* represents cultural pride and family nostalgia, and is a reminder of a time when their way of life was more accepted by the wider society. Because of their nomadic way of life, and since it was customary for some travelling groups to burn a wagon when its owner died, it is rare to find authentic 19th- or 20th-century Roma or Traveller wagons today. However, replica *vardos* are becoming increasingly popular for both Roma and Traveller communities and those who are interested in the wagons as historical artefacts or who relish the freedom and simplicity these living wagons can provide as temporary accommodation.

However, to regard Roma and Travellers today as separate from this idealised historical past of bow-top caravans, horses and lively music contributes to a serious social issue. By celebrating only Roma and Traveller communities of the wagon period, society does not account for these communities changing over time, and thus places them outside of a country's or region's historical narrative. Furthermore, when groups are marginalised in the historical record, they are at risk of losing their right to claim a history.

According to Taylor and Hinks (2021), Roma and Traveller history in the United Kingdom and Ireland is under-researched. However, these histories should no longer be viewed as an optional extra or as topics that should be left to Roma or Traveller specialists. Further study and dissemination of these histories must be seen as a vital step in expanding and diversifying European national histories.

2. Using the *vardo* for an object biography in the classroom

This object biography can be connected to the following curricular themes:

- ▶ European migration;
- ▶ transportation;
- ▶ mobility;
- ▶ domestic dwellings;
- ▶ economic history (e.g. evolution/effects of capitalism and private property/ownership);
- ▶ effects of urbanisation;
- ▶ effects of industrialism;
- ▶ environmental sustainability;
- ▶ peripatetic indigenous groups;
- ▶ limitations/complexities of the welfare state.

Activity understanding goals

- ▶ Learners understand that Irish Travellers and Roma each have very different customs, religion, language and heritage.
- ▶ Learners understand that, although Travellers and Roma are a diverse range of people, their common identity is based on their cultural mobility.
- ▶ Learners understand that, over time, space has become a scarcity and a precious commodity, and this has resulted in unequal access to it.
- ▶ Learners understand that space is usually managed and socially constructed in a hegemonic way by the majoritarian society, and that this often results in the exclusion of groups that challenge the dominant way of life.
- ▶ Learners understand that Travellers and Roma communities live in a variety of different types of accommodation and ways today, including:
 - moving regularly from site to site;
 - living permanently in caravans or mobile homes;
 - living in settled accommodation during certain periods and travelling during others;
 - living in bricks-and-mortar housing but still retaining a strong commitment to Roma or Traveller culture and traditions.

Step 1 – Hook the students’ interest and introduce the object through a class discussion

For this object biography, a specific *vardo* (currently housed in the Bristol Museum) will be analysed by students. A photograph of this *vardo* can be seen below:



Figure 4: Vardo currently in Bristol Museum.

Source: Bristol Museum and Art Gallery

Using the object to attract students to the subject is fundamental to the strategy. This could be done in a variety of different ways. Here are some examples.

- ▶ The teacher provides a photo of the object and then encourage students to use their critical thinking and inference skills to answer the reflection questions below.
- ▶ Students put together puzzle pieces at their desk to reveal the picture, or the teacher projects different sections of it onto a blank screen to create the whole picture.
- ▶ The teacher adds new photos to a photo collage after each round of questioning to see if students can develop their answers.

Reflection questions for discussion orally or in small groups

- ▶ What is this?
- ▶ Who used this object?
- ▶ What do you think the object was used for? What do you think it was not used for?
- ▶ When was it created?
- ▶ What materials were used to create this object?
- ▶ Where was it created?
- ▶ What might this object tell us about history?
- ▶ What purposes do the different design features serve?

Step 2 – Refine the enquiry questions for individuals or small groups: see, think, wonder

Based on the class discussions about the object, students should complete a “See, think, wonder” chart (a Project Zero thinking routine) (Project Zero 2025) in pairs or in groups. It is valuable to have this handwritten so that teachers can gain a sense of the different levels of prior understanding among the students and so all enquiry questions can be recorded. The “wonder” questions will help to guide the enquiry and inform the teacher of the themes that students are most curious about. The teacher can also use prompt questions to ensure that some enquiry questions connect to curricular themes that the class is meant to cover (e.g. “What wonders do we have that connect to migration?”).

Step 3 – Analyse the components of the object biography

Teachers and students should select the enquiry question(s) that will be the focus of their analysis. These foci may be the same for the whole group or vary from group to group (see potential curricular themes above for some options).

For the analysis, teachers should provide students with relevant source materials in addition to the museum’s object information. For this activity, students may benefit from some prior reading relating to an overview of Roma and Traveller history and culture. For example, teachers could pull extracts from the “Historical background” text included in this teaching strategy, the Council of Europe “Roma History factsheets” (which are offered in a variety of languages) or the 2023 *Traveller culture and history research report* written by Ireland’s National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2023). Students may also benefit from having a map of the British Isles so they can understand the specific city or regional references.

Optional sources that teachers may choose to include in the analysis phase are:

- additional photos of the *vardo*;



Figures 5, 6 and 7: Vardo interior and exterior

Source: [Bristol Museum Collections](#).

- ▶ photos of the *vardo* at different times;



Figure 8: *Vardo exterior*

Source: [Bristol Museum Collections](#).

- ▶ a labelled diagram of the different components of the *vardo*;
- ▶ an overview of the different types of *vardo*;

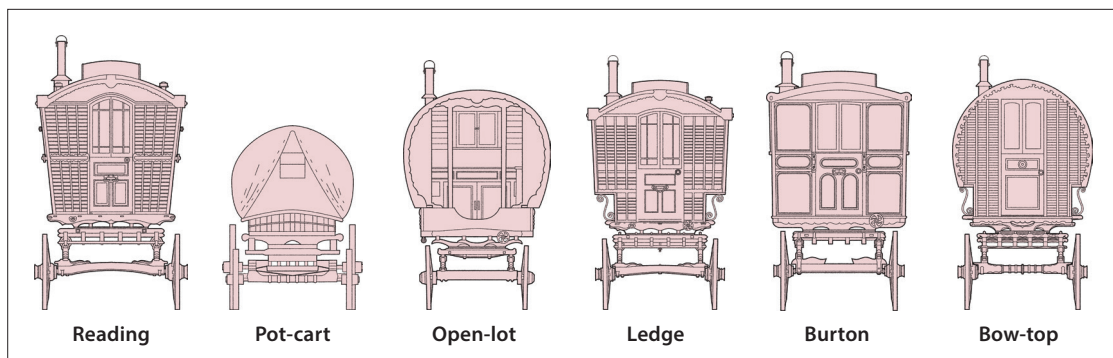


Figure 9: *Different types of vardo*

Source: [Salford City Council](#) (n.d.).

- ▶ book and article extracts about the history of the *vardo*;
- ▶ photographs of modern caravans and other modern dwellings;
- ▶ personal accounts by Roma and Traveller people of how they define “home”;
- ▶ extracts of recent articles and government publications from across the British Isles relating to the domestic dwellings of Traveller and Roma communities today;
 - Example: “I don’t want anyone tormenting me, I want peace” – life in Ireland’s oldest Traveller housing site, [Irish Independent](#), May 2023.
 - Example: “Social barriers faced by Roma, Gypsies and Travellers laid bare in equality survey”, [The Guardian](#), April 2023.
- ▶ extracts of recent articles and government publications from across Europe relating to challenges that Traveller and Roma families face when trying to uphold a culture of mobility or impermanent housing;
 - Example: “Belgium’s police raids on Romani Travellers deemed discriminatory by European Committee”, European Roma Rights Centre (2023).

Object biography timeline: the *vardo*

One way of helping students to place the object in a wider narrative is by locating the relevant events on a timeline. To do this, teachers can provide students with cards, each of which represents an event, and ask students, in pairs or groups, to arrange the cards in chronological order. After this, they can reflect on how each event is connected to the thematic focus of the lesson (see the above list of possible curricular themes).

The following are some examples of the event cards that can be used based on Druce (n.d.).

1. The wagon was built around 1900 in Reading. It is a large four-wheeled enclosed caravan, intended to be drawn by one horse. The tall rear wheels of the Reading caravan were designed to traverse challenging off-road terrain. The body is painted elaborately, with decoration typical of the style of living wagons, or *vardo*(e)s (Romani for "living wagon"). The base colour is crimson, with light green, light blue and light caramel features. A chimney projects from the roof on the driver's side. This caravan bears the key features associated with a van built by Samuel Dunton of Reading, Berkshire, England. A van of this type would have cost about £150 when new.
2. Noah and Annie O'Connor move into the wagon with their family in about 1916. An "A" is painted above some of the windows of the wagon, which stands for Annie.
3. Noah O'Connor is killed in a road accident in 1925, leaving Annie a widow.
4. Annie sells the wagon and the family move to a smaller wagon shortly after Noah's death. This is probably to provide some financial support for Annie and the children.
5. After the wagon is sold, it is moved to Lock's Yard (also known as Dorney's Yard) in Bedminster, an area on the south side of Bristol. The owners are not known, but may have been members of Annie O'Connor's extended family.
6. Annie O'Connor's grandchild is born in the caravan in 1934.
7. In 1950 the caravan is sold again. This time, it is bought by a Miss Cunningham of Dorking. At this time the caravan is known as "Ela", its name being painted on the door.
8. Miss Cunningham sells the caravan to a holiday camp in Glamorgan, Wales, in 1951.
9. The *vardo* is bought by the Blaise Folk Museum in Bristol in 1953 and displayed outside.
10. The wagon is burgled in 1957. There is some damage to the interior and exterior doors. It is decided that a new, more secure home for the caravan is needed.
11. The caravan is moved to Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, to be displayed among the transportation exhibits in 1957.
12. The Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960 becomes law in the UK. It requires occupiers of land to obtain a licence from the local borough or district council before they can use the land as a caravan site. The licence may be revoked or refused as the council deems necessary. Violation of licensing terms results in large fines.
13. The O'Connor family reunion is held at the Bristol Museum in 2019. Many stories, photographs and family heirlooms are shared, which helps to piece together the history of this fascinating *vardo*.

Step 4 – Discussion

Students should begin by sharing (through discussion, presentation or a journaling activity) the answers they found to the initial enquiry question(s) on which their source analysis focused (see Step 2 above).

To wrap up the activity, the teacher may lead a concluding discussion or ask students to select one or two questions to reflect on individually or in a small group. Some questions will be more applicable or relevant than others depending on the thematic lens used to approach the object biography.

- ▶ What can this object tell us about attitudes towards migration and mobility over time?
- ▶ What can this object tell us about the effects of urbanisation over time?
- ▶ What can this object tell us about changing perceptions of ownership and of the restrictions of space?
- ▶ What can this object tell us about attitudes towards indigenous groups over time?
- ▶ What can this object tell us about continuity and change in sustainable lifestyles?
- ▶ Has this object always been displayed as part of the historical narrative or has it or its creator experienced historical erasure or omission in the past?
- ▶ What can this object tell us about economic practices over time?
- ▶ Does this object show a connected or a conflicted world?

Key discussion points to draw out

This object biography highlights the complexity of evolving identities over time and the changing attitudes towards peripatetic indigenous groups and encourages students to make connections between it and the themes of migration, mobility and nomadic lifestyles. In addition, the *vardo* highlights the environmentally low-impact lifestyles of many people in these communities. This caravan-centred way of life, which treads lightly on the planet, can actually help the world combat environmental destruction. Through analysing the *vardo*, students can also reflect on the history of Roma and Traveller people in western Europe and how these groups were impacted by a changing social, economic and political landscape. By comparing the treatment and status of Roma and Traveller groups in the 19th century with today, students can reveal the damaging nature of hegemonic social and economic policies.

To take the subject further, students can spend time exploring whether there is a disconnect between the often-romanticised culture of the Roma and Traveller communities that is portrayed in popular culture and the treatment of these individuals in modern society, and if so what the causes of this may be. It would be ideal, where possible, to also have someone from one of these communities speak to the students about their first-hand experiences and their family's oral histories and to answer any questions that students may have.

A note for educators

What obstacles could a teacher face when using this strategy?

Since Roma and Traveller history is often based in oral history and is often under-researched, it may be challenging to find sources in all the European languages. However, advanced AI technology may offer effective translation tools to enable teachers to use the example sources provided in this teaching strategy.

Some students may come into this lesson with misconceptions or discriminatory views of the Roma and/or Traveller community. It is important for teachers to address false and potentially abusive assumptions. There are a variety of tools already available to educators to help combat these views in the classroom (e.g. the Council of Europe's "Manual on combating antigypsyism through human rights education") or teachers can use some of the class activities from the NGO Learning for Justice (2025).

How can this strategy be made more inclusive?

Lower-attaining students can be supported in the following ways.

- ▶ Teachers can rely more on visual sources and/or provide adapted materials for different reading levels.
- ▶ Teachers can vary the number of sources provided to students according to their abilities.
- ▶ Teachers can provide students with a glossary of key terms.
- ▶ Teachers can provide students with printed versions of the sources, which are often easier to analyse than digital versions.
- ▶ Teachers can group students to ensure that groups contain students of mixed abilities.
- ▶ Teachers can differentiate enquiry questions to suit different levels of critical thinking, using Bloom's taxonomy to help differentiate the question stems.

To challenge higher-attaining students, teachers may:

- ▶ use more sophisticated sources;
- ▶ require students to carry out their own research to find sources connected to their enquiry question(s);
- ▶ vary the medium in which students share their learning (class discussion, presentation, podcast, website, essay, school symposium, etc.) on the basis of their ability;
- ▶ ask students with a more advanced level of critical thinking ability to investigate and evaluate Roma and Traveller accommodation provisions in their country or region and propose improvements to local politicians.

Other suitable objects related to Roma and Traveller communities include:

- ▶ tin lantern (e.g. [National Museum of Ireland](#) n.d.);
- ▶ Uilleann pipes (Moylan n.d.);
- ▶ Katarina Taikon's (1932-1995) autobiographical figure Katitzi, the main character in 13 children's books and eight comic albums, originally published in Swedish between 1969 and 1982 (e.g. European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture, 2019);
- ▶ a piece of art (e.g. a provocative piece by the Roma artist Daniel Baker);
- ▶ traditional dress, scarves, jewellery or wooden dolls (e.g. Muzeum Romské Kultury in the Czech Republic);
- ▶ a shawm (musical instrument) (e.g. [RomArchive](#) n.d.).

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About the author

Sinéad Fitzsimons has over 15 years of teaching experience in diverse and multicultural contexts, including Canada, Belgium, England and Northern Ireland. Her doctoral research examined the role of education in shaping identity within post-conflict and divided societies, and she has contributed extensively to peacebuilding and diversity in education projects through curriculum development, resource creation and teacher training. This has included projects focused on incorporating Roma and Traveller histories into the History classroom. She has also been involved in major international projects focused on education access for children on the move, including serving on the curriculum team for the UNICEF Learning Passport initiative. She currently works as a Social Studies teacher in London and also serves on the board of the Friends of EuroClio Foundation.

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