Virtual Vacation:

An Academic and Cultural Approach to Afterschool Education

A Leader's Guide

By **Christopher Bentivegna, Katie Gelfand,** and **Sam Piha**

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation
PRESERVING AMERICA'S AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Virtual Vacation:

An Academic and Cultural Approach to Afterschool Education

A Leader's Guide

Christopher Bentivegna, Katie Gelfand, and Sam Piha

With special contributions by Laura Karosic

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

Acknowledgements

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

Table of Contents

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

Opening Remarks

Christopher Bentivegna, The NHP Foundation

Several years ago, shortly after I began working for The NHP Foundation, my colleague Mary Catherine Moffett and I were developing the summer camp program for our New Orleans community centers. We were dividing the day into sections that would meet different needs; academic enrichment, physical activities, literacy, arts, etc. One thing that we had both noticed during the previous year's afterschool program was that our participants did not have a strong awareness (either geographically or historically) of cultures and places outside of New Orleans.

We agreed that we should add a component to the day that would help to enrich our participants' understanding of other places. We decided that we would focus on the USA and we researched and printed out information about all fifty states. Every day the participants in our program would sit on a large rug, that also happened to be a map of the United States, and they would pick names of different states out of a hat. We would then read to them information about those states. After a few minutes, we would ask them questions about what they had just learned and everyone who could answer a question correctly would receive a small prize. We called this part of the day *Virtual Vacation.*

Although Ms. Moffett soon moved on to work for a different organization, her belief in a creative approach to education remained with me and continued to inspire me as I worked to develop the programs that the NHP Foundation offered to our participants.

Over the years, this very simple concept of teaching youth about the geography and culture, (of what to them seemed like very faraway places), has evolved into a much richer program that also includes elements of performing and fine arts, health and wellness, language arts, math, science, and several other academic and creative components.

We now use our *Virtual Vacation* program as a basis for almost all of our afterschool activities. This program has evolved into a multi-layered, outcomes-based approach, which enhances the lives of our afterschool participants through an immersion into global and project-based learning, focusing on academic enrichment and cultural awareness.

Over the years, there have been many professionals in the afterschool field who have helped me develop this approach and I am grateful to every one of them. In the last three years, I have worked very closely with my colleague Katie Gelfand to strengthen this approach by developing 'in-house' guides for our staff that explain the process and help to track program outcomes. We have also developed trainings which teach program leaders how to implement *Virtual Vacation,* and have carefully documented the activities that we have done with our participants over the years.

We have been very fortunate to have the support of Sam Piha, who has always believed in this approach, and who has worked with us over the years by encouraging us and by offering invaluable support and guidance. I am so excited and happy that the three of us were able to work together to create a more fully realized *Virtual Vacation* guide in order to share this successful approach with our colleagues in the afterschool field who work tirelessly every day to enhance the lives of youth.

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

Opening Remarks

Tom Little, Director, Park Day School, Oakland, California

Picture a group of actively engaged students in Harlem learning about the history, culture, and traditions of the people living in Alaska, or on a reservation in Arizona. Through art, drama, and music activities, they immerse themselves in the day-to-day lifestyle of people in a faraway place. Their teachers expose the students to the language and literature of the region, while engaging them in activities that help to reinforce their geography, science, and math skills. All this is possible through the magic of *Virtual Vacation.*

Much has been written about the skills our students will require to successfully navigate the 21st century. *Virtual Vacation* helps to construct this bank of skills by encouraging collaboration, critical thinking, and creative problem solving.

By immersing them in the exploration and study of other states or countries, teachers help students build their knowledge base and understanding of culture and history. They read and write about other places, create maps, and learn local traditions; all without leaving the shelter of their school or neighborhood afterschool program.

The developers of this accessible and innovative program have harnessed the power of available technologies, combined with research based educational best practices, to produce an afterschool program that seeks to bring a larger world to students who might never have been exposed to the richness of other places and cultures. This is education as it should be: the best of integrated curriculum and activity based learning. *Virtual Vacation* will have a powerful impact on student learning and achievement, surely to the benefit of our children and youth.

Sam Piha, Founder, Temescal Associates, Oakland, California

In 2007, Enterprise Community Partners asked me to pay a visit to an afterschool program located in an affordable housing community outside of New Orleans. The purpose of the visit was to provide the director, Christopher Bentivegna, with a program consultation and any ideas that could improve their work with children. Upon walking through the door of the program, I was struck by the brightly painted walls and the evidence of high activity. As an elementary school teacher of 10 years, I knew that the walls of a classroom could serve as a window to the quality of the learning that was taking place.

These walls were covered with maps punctuated by brightly colored pushpins and children's artwork, which included paintings that resembled the impressionistic works of Europe, drawings of Greek gods, colorful paper mache sculptures of Egyptian Pharaohs, and three-dimensional dioramas of the rainforest. All of the displays represented souvenirs from previous *Virtual Vacations,* studies of countries around the world that were conducted using a creative, integrated approach.

Christopher explained, "We learn about the country from the perspective of a family living there. We learn about what they do, what they eat, their language and customs, their history and their holidays. The learning is reinforced because we ourselves enact what we are learning about. We build word walls as we learn words in the native language and new terms related to the country. We cook and eat the native dishes, listen to the native music, read their myths and stories of their history, play their sports, and attempt to re-create the indigenous arts and crafts.

I encouraged the staff to document their many vacations and promised to find the means to work with them to write up this elegant approach to learning that was both simple and complex. Even though it took several years to find the needed resources, we are very pleased to offer this leader's guide to encourage others to use this effective, integrated approach to learning.

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

Chapter 1

About *Virtual Vacation*

Introduction

Virtual Vacation is an academic, cultural, and creativity-based program developed specifically for an afterschool setting. During a *Virtual Vacation,* participants virtually travel to a destination or period in history and learn about it through academic and creative components. Participants are enveloped by the culture of the chosen destination through a multitude of activities that also promote positive youth development.

Through the use of a multi-layered, project-based learning approach to education, participants acquire knowledge through visual, auditory, and tactile methods. Also, by teaching participants to have awareness of other cultures, they learn to have more awareness of their own communities. For example, while participants create a three-dimensional map of Trinidad, they simultaneously read facts about the geography of the country, listen to Soca – the local dance music – and compare their own lifestyles to that of a Trinidadian.

Virtual Vacation respects various learning styles and intelligences, is sensitive to different stages of cognitive developments, offers a holistic approach to academic enrichment, and can be aligned with grade level standards.

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

About the *Virtual Vacation* Leader's Guide

Purpose

The *Virtual Vacation* leader's guide was written as a resource for those who oversee, develop, and implement afterschool programs and who wish to enrich the activities they provide to their participants by incorporating a structured approach that combines academics, culture, and creativity. *Virtual Vacation* is particularly well-suited to elementary age children, but can be adapted for older youth.

How to Use the Leader's Guide

For those of you interested in incorporating *Virtual Vacation* into your afterschool programs, we encourage you to begin by reading the description and benefits of the *Virtual Vacation* approach (Chapter 1). You will want to carefully review the *Virtual Vacation* components (Chapter 2) and then the *Virtual Vacation* examples (Chapter 5). These activity examples can serve as a curriculum to guide your first *Virtual Vacation.* We encourage you to use the *Virtual Vacation* examples before embarking on new destinations and before creating your own *Virtual Vacation.*

The section entitled "Getting Started" (Chapter 3) walks you through the steps that are needed for effective implementation. The *Virtual Vacation* planning templates (Chapter 4) will be useful for planning and documenting the course of your *Virtual Vacation.* Regardless of whether you use one of the enclosed examples or create your own *Virtual Vacation,* be sure to pay attention to helpful hints given throughout as well as the resources provided at the end of the leader's guide.

What Makes the *Virtual Vacation* Approach Effective?

✓ *Learning that is Brain-Based*

Based on recent research about the new science of learning, children learn best when educational experiences are integrated, active, collaborative, and meaningful (www.learninginafterschool.org).

Integrated Learning: Successful classroom teachers and afterschool workers alike employ learning and teaching approaches that draw upon children's natural curiosities and embed the learning in ways that are fun, interesting, and interactive. It is also important that these approaches are inclusive of children with different strengths and learning styles.

One way to achieve this is through the use of an integrated curriculum. This means selecting a theme and teaching it through the lens of various academic subjects.

The theme in *Virtual Vacation* is the destination, and the learning incorporates geography, the sciences, social studies, history, art, literacy, and more. According to research, using integrated curriculum helps young people learn to apply skills, leads to faster retrieval of information, encourages breadth and depth in learning, and promotes positive attitudes in students. "Integrated curriculum is effective because it corresponds with the way our brain works physiologically. Rather than separating knowledge into discrete partitions, the brain creates a complex web of information that recognizes patterns." (Connect for Education, *Integrated Curriculum Guide*: http://www.archeworks.org/projects/tcsp/ic_guide_p3.html).

Active Learning: Learning is active when new knowledge is conveyed through different exposures – seeing, hearing, touching, and doing. The *Virtual Vacation* approach involves young people in participatory learning that allows them to be physically active, stimulates their innate curiosity, and engages them in activities that are hands-on and project-based.

Hands-on learning involves the child in a total learning experience, which enhances the child's ability to think critically. When children are engaged in project-based learning, they are constantly active and creatively excited. Research has shown that children are more likely to retain information through project-based learning activities than they are through traditional textbook learning.

Collaborative Learning: Learning that is collaborative is socially centered and allows young people to learn as a team. It builds skills that include listening to others, supporting group-learning goals, resolving differences and conflicts, and making room for each member to contribute his or her individual talents.

Virtual Vacation activities encourage learners to engage in a common task where every individual depends on and is accountable to his or her team members.

Meaningful Learning: Young people are intrinsically motivated when they find their learning meaningful by having ownership over the learning topic and the means to assess their own progress.

Young people can be involved in selecting their *Virtual Vacation* destination and conducting research on aspects of the destination that they want to learn more about.

Motivation is increased when the learning is relevant to their own interests, experiences, and the real world in which they live. The *Virtual Vacation* approach stimulates all learning styles and appeals to multiple intelligences. The project-based learning that occurs in this approach brings the subject matter to life and provides participants with alternative means with which to express themselves creatively.

✓ *Learning that Builds Global Awareness and Cultural Competency*

Preparing young people to be successful in the 21ˢᵗ century requires activities that help them become aware and interested in learning about the larger global community. It also responds to their deep curiosity about far away places and helps to lessen the mystery of the differences between cultures.

"In today's interconnected world, knowledge of other peoples, economies, and languages is no longer a luxury reserved for a business or policymaking elite, but an absolute necessity as part of every child's preparation for successful citizenship. Given the diversity of the United States, knowledge of other cultures is also essential to strengthening the functioning of our own democracy and educational system." (http://asiasociety.org/files/afterschoolreport-1.pdf)

According to the Asia Society, "A program that successfully builds global competence in youth harnesses a variety of teaching and learning methodologies, including project-based learning, field trips, and community-based projects..." (Asia Society, *The Global Learning in Afterschool Self-Assessment Tool: http://sites.asiasociety.org/pgl2010/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/afterschool-assessment.pdf*).

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

The *Virtual Vacation* approach exposes young people to different cultures and ideas and gives them a multi-dimensional understanding through a variety of learning activities. One way to demonstrate cultural competency is by comparing different holidays. For example, during the month of December, the *Virtual Vacation* destination can be 'winter holidays around the world.' Participants can be exposed to and study a variety of the winter holidays that take place in different countries and the cultures that celebrate them. These can include Diwali in India, Kwanzaa in the U.S.A., Hanukkah in Israel, as well as different Christmas and Yuletide traditions around the globe. While learning about the ways others throughout the world celebrate different holidays, participants will more fully understand the cultural importance of their own traditions and celebrations, helping to create a greater global understanding of cultures in general.

✓ *Building Literacy*

Literacy includes the development of skills related to listening, writing, talking, reading, and viewing. The *Virtual Vacation* approach offers multiple opportunities to build skills in all of these areas. For example, literacy activities can include listening to, reading, and illustrating mythology and other culturally important stories that are part of the *Virtual Vacation* destination. *Virtual Vacation* also offers excellent opportunities to expand young people's vocabulary and explore new languages. (Examples of these kinds of activities are found later in the leader's guide.) One consistent method of incorporating literacy is by creating a *Do You Know?* board for each *Virtual Vacation* activity, which is a display of information about the chosen destination (see pages 37-38 for more information about this component).

✓ *Cross-Age Learning*

The *Virtual Vacation* approach is effective with multiage groups, because most children, regardless of age, are interested in and curious about far away places and cultures. One of the challenges faced by many afterschool programs is how to address the age-appropriate needs and interests of a multiage group of children. Because cognitive development does not follow a strict schedule, children become ready for higher levels of learning at different times. This concept is critical for developing programs in multiage afterschool settings. The most ideal multiage learning environments promote activities that are sensitive to various stages of the participants' cognitive developments and create projects and opportunities that reflect this sensitivity. *Virtual Vacation* attempts to challenge children academically while providing activities that lead them toward success.

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

The *Virtual Vacation* approach is flexible and can be adapted to the needs of different age groups. Each *Virtual Vacation* project should have enough structure so that participants are challenged, enough flexibility to enable older youth to assume leadership roles or opportunities for more sophisticated activities, and be sensitive to those youth who may require more guidance and assistance.

For instance, older youth can conduct research on the destination and work with program leaders to plan some of the *Virtual Vacation* activities and can assume responsibility in leading the younger children through the activities. This helps create a "family of learners" where younger children benefit from the leadership of older youth and older youth are recognized by being given advanced responsibilities.

Because children look up to and are influenced by the behavior of older youth, a strong youth leader can be a positive role model and motivator for their younger peers.

✓ *Promoting Positive Youth Development*

"Youth development refers to the process through which all young people seek ways to meet their basic physical and social needs and to build knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in adolescence and young adulthood." (Community Network for Youth Development, *Youth Development Guide: Engaging Young People in After-School Programming.*)

In 2002, the National Academy of Sciences issued a study on how community programs support healthy youth development.

This study cited several critical features of programs that support healthy youth development, including program opportunities that promoted a sense of belonging, support for efficacy (opportunities that support autonomy, responsibility, and leadership), and the opportunity to build important skills.

Researchers also concluded that these skills included physical, intellectual, emotional, and social skills. (*Community Programs to Promote Youth Development*, Institute of Medicine National Research Council of the National Academies, November 2004: http://www.bocyf.org/ youth_development_brief.pdf)

The National Academy of Science study also cites the importance of exposure to intentional learning experiences and the opportunity to learn cultural literacy, media literacy, communication skills, as well as critical thinking and good decision-making skills.

The *Virtual Vacation* approach emphasizes creativity, community, culture, and world knowledge, and focuses on activities that develop children's strengths and interests. It can directly effect positive changes in adolescent and preadolescent behavior. The benefits from participation in *Virtual Vacation* transcend typical academic ones and allow participants to also become more motivated, socially competent, compassionate, and spirited individuals.

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

Chapter 2

Virtual Vacation Components: Integrating Academic and Creative Activities

Virtual Vacation activities are comprised of both academic and creative components. Throughout a *Virtual Vacation*, each activity should utilize different academic and creative components to provide participants with opportunities to learn and express themselves through a variety of methods and acquire an assortment of skills. These skills include teamwork, various art techniques, and problem solving abilities. The use of these components allow participants to be engaged in a stimulating and kinesthetic activity where they learn by doing. Teaching and learning moments happen throughout the activity rather than by means of a formal lesson.

Academic components enhance the *Virtual Vacation* curriculum by reinforcing the skills and information that your participants are learning in school. These components will ideally appeal to different learning styles because they will be implemented through hands-on and multi-sensory activities. By infusing academic components into project-based activities, participants absorb scholastic information within a creative and active learning environment. Academic components within a *Virtual Vacation* include: geography, history, language arts, mathematics, and science.

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

Creative components applied to program activities serve as tools that engage and stimulate participants' interests in learning about the *Virtual Vacation* destination. As participants learn together through the creation of projects, these components help to develop their creative and cognitive skills, by appealing to a variety of learning styles, interests, and natural talents. Creative components within a *Virtual Vacation* include: culinary arts, cultural studies, fine arts, fitness, performing arts, and music.

There are a handful of cultural and creative arts that do not wholly fit into a single category, such as fashion design, movie making, and song writing. Take African drumming as an example: it incorporates music, fitness, and performing arts. Another example is puppetry, which incorporates fine arts and performing arts.

As long as the activities are creative and reflect the culture of the destination, whether or not it is able to fit into a single category is not important.

TEMESCAL Associates

NHPfoundation

Academic Components

🌐 Geography

Geography is the science that deals with the study of the Earth and its lands, features, inhabitants, and phenomena. When embarking on a new *Virtual Vacation,* show participants the location of the destination on a map or a globe. This is an opportunity for them to see where the destination is in relation to where they live and in relation to other places in the world.

One way to incorporate geography into a *Virtual Vacation* is through mapmaking. Constructing and labeling a map of the destination is an excellent way for participants to learn about the place, and enhances their knowledge of its geography by familiarizing participants with the major cities, bodies of water, deserts, and mountain ranges of the destination.

Maps can also include artistic representations of cultural icons, such as flags, famous people and landmarks, monuments, and holidays. The icons should represent the diversity of the culture and encourage participants to reflect on important icons in their own life and home. Mapmaking also provides an opportunity to discuss environmental and geographical differences between that location and where the participants live.