The Getting Practical – Improving Practical Work in Science programme offers professional development for primary teachers across England. During the 2009/2010 academic year, 237 primary teachers attended a Getting Practical training course, giving themselves the opportunity to reflect upon their own teaching practices and consider ways to make their teaching of practical science more effective. The programme aims to improve the:

- clarity of learning outcomes associated with practical work;
- effectiveness and impact of the practical work undertaken;
- sustainability of this approach for ongoing improvements with schools as a whole;
- quality rather than quantity of practical work.

The key messages of the Getting Practical programme are designed to be used in the training of both primary and secondary teachers. However, there are of course different approaches to teaching for these levels. Following feedback from primary experts during the earlier stages of the programme, specific training materials have been produced for use with primary teachers. Two primary teachers, Janet Chetwood and Mel Smith, offer us their different perspectives, as trainee and trainer, on the programme and how it has impacted on their teaching.

Janet’s reflections as a science subject leader
I have never been the sort of teacher that settles for last year’s plans, so the Getting Practical review sheets are really useful for keeping me on track with addressing a spread of teaching and learning skills (Box 1). I was already familiar with many of the resources highlighted by the Getting Practical website (see Websites) but it is always useful to be reminded of how many good-quality materials are on offer. The course has given me the confidence and support to keep being original and up to date, while incorporating the children’s ideas.

Impact in the classroom
Within my school, I have always...
encouraged teachers to focus on what and how they want the children to record: what skill is actually being taught that ‘needs’ recording. The key message of the training supports this, and reminds us that children can be overwhelmed by too much recording. Teachers can still offer a whole investigation, but now they know exactly what focus is to be placed on the practical science skills. This is really critical when the children are so enthusiastic. Our children love practical work in science and enjoy making decisions themselves in an investigative manner. We have many ‘playtimes’ during which questions arise and lead us into the next lesson. Managing this effectively is vital for maximum impact on the children’s learning and Getting Practical has reminded us of how this can be achieved.

Currently I teach science across key stage 2 (ages 7–11), but the class teachers also teach some of the science topics. This works well because they are able to incorporate the science into their termly topics, such as ‘Food and farming’ in year 4 (ages 8–9) and ‘The rainforest’ in year 5 (ages 9–10). I also don’t like to feel that I am dispensable!

One point I have to remember is that, while I am really keen and focused on science, other teachers have many other pressures on their time from elsewhere in the school. The training has really helped to reduce some of these, particularly the staff feeling that they have to get the children to produce lots of written work. Many of the teachers were interested to see how focusing on only a few skills and their learning outcomes improved the effectiveness of the practical lesson. It is important, though, to have high-quality activities for the skills to be developed fully.

Indirect consequences

I have also been using the Getting Practical training as a way of working with my local secondary school, which has provided all of us with a cross-phase view. We have all learnt a lot from each other, including spotting a link between Assessing Pupils’ Progress (APP) and the Getting Practical programme. As my school is just starting to work with APP, those links will prove useful and we will be having further discussions. We have also been able to exchange equipment, including (interestingly) the secondary school borrowing our magnets!
They were able to explain occasions in their teaching when ‘hands’ had been ‘on’ but ‘minds’ were not! I used the review sheets as a gap task between the two parts of the course, giving teachers a chance to take them back to their schools and look at their teaching in that context.

**What did the course delegates think?**

Feedback from the delegates was very positive and they all took away materials from the training that they felt they could use in their teaching with their classes. It is essential to provide time within the course to talk about and discuss ideas because there is so little free time in school. This worked well in bringing together teachers within the local authority, creating an informal network of support amongst them.

All the teachers were keen to take back the Getting Practical message and implement it in their own schools. They felt the training would benefit the children by addressing their needs more effectively and encouraging them to apply their science skills to other situations.

**Final thoughts from a trainer**

As a trainer, I thoroughly enjoyed all the opportunities to share best practice and encourage the ideas of the other teachers. It is vital to continually develop activities and make practical work in science in the primary classroom more real and relevant for the children.

**How to get involved in Getting Practical**

Getting Practical courses are being offered locally and free of charge across England by Getting Practical trainers. See [www.gettingpractical.org.uk](http://www.gettingpractical.org.uk)

To register your interest in attending a course near you, contact: kirstiehampson@ase.org.uk

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