

Abacus

Reviewed by: **John Dabell**

Why
Abacus?

Under the spotlight this issue is a unique maths toolkit from Pearson that's been carefully crafted for the new primary maths curriculum. Its name? Abacus. Good old Abacus. Actually, good new Abacus. I've used loads of maths schemes over the years, but Abacus is the one to which I've always taken a shine. I know where I am with it and it has served me and my classes extremely well. The planning is top-notch and written by those in the know. The activities, especially those involving ICT, are purposeful and exciting, and the teacher support is excellent – notably when it comes to assessment.

The question is, has it changed? Well, it's had to evolve in order to shake hands with the new maths curriculum, but I'm pleased to say things are still hunky-dory.

The complete toolkit includes a number of different elements. There's an online planning tool for teachers, which is packed with inspiring ideas and assessment materials. Pupils get their own online world as well, within which there's a wealth of lively games, problem-solving activities galore, avatars and rewards. Added to this you have workbooks, textbooks and oodles of support should you need it.

On closer inspection you will find daily, weekly and medium term plans that can be easily edited. After all, do you really need to reinvent the wheel? You'll have to add or subtract your own spokes and tinker with the gears for uphill maths work, but this is perfectly possible using such grand designs. There's an editable Y1-6 calculation policy for goodness sake – how helpful is that!

The overview of calculation methods and strategies for KS1 and KS2 are colourful, clear and perfect for running parent workshops; helping mums, dads and carers understand current teaching methods. Additional expert help is also on hand from Ruth Merttens, who appears in videos that talks you through calculation strategies.

If you need to stop and search for a concept or resource, type in what you are looking for and let the system strut its stuff. Lesson plans are detailed, if not a bit too scripted in places, and link to helpful resources here, there and everywhere. The online activities within Abacus are some of the best you will see in primary maths, and it's easy to allocate these electronically to the children in your class (saving what information you need to your own files).

Teachers don't get all the goodies, though. Children have the best deal. Their experience is split into two parts: Make Sense and Practise. The Make Sense chunk contains excellent activities that focus on problem-solving and reasoning, speaking and listening, and structured play. The Practice portion, meanwhile, is full of graded practice, homework videos, fluency fitness, five-minute fillers, quick maths, workbooks and textbooks.

The Abacus folks have got things spot on for kids. Activities are child-friendly, bursting with vigour, highly engaging and pitched perfectly for the primary key stages.

The paint isn't yet dry on the new maths curriculum and we've all got to put up with the fumes before things settle down. But Abacus is ahead of the game – its activities and advice is bullseye stuff in a time of change.

If you head to the forums then you'll find reviews of the old resource from teachers who say that the pupil books are okay for average middle attainers, but too easy for solid middle mathematicians and high flyers - and I'd say this hasn't been completely resolved.

It's also been said that Abacus resources can be too over-prescriptive and are heavy on the IT. But then you can't suit everyone. This is the point. I think it could be brilliant for you and your school. It's worked for me in high achieving leafy suburbs and it's worked just as well in city schools. What I'd like to see are more videos, especially child-friendly clips explaining methods and ways of working. I also want an uber precise online dictionary and a greater range of creative assessment strategies.

The verdict – builds maths confidence

You've got everything here to inspire a genuine love of maths because Abacus is founded on a commitment to securing conceptual understanding, building numerical fluency, developing problem-solving skills and buffing mathematical confidence. The great thing about Abacus is that you can try before you buy. At least get a free demo, if nothing else. If you do decide to sign up then rest assured pricing is competitive and fair.

Abacus was reviewed by John Dabell for Teach Primary. Read the full article at www.teachprimary.com/trying_and_tested/view/abacus

Find out more

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