Group gives about 2,000 members a platform to discuss industry issues

By KEZIA TOH

This champion to raise the profiles of preschool teachers here comes from an unlikely source—a tall and strapping former military man.

Twelve years ago, Mr Philip Koh made the switch from training NSmen to teaching preschoolers their ABCs, after more than a decade in the army.

Three weeks ago, the 49-year-old set up a network for preschool teachers to talk about issues close to their heart—from salary issues to how best to motivate and teach young children.

The informal group—believed to be the first here—has a presence on Facebook, and has since drawn close to 2,000 members.

Said Mr Koh: “The key objective is to create a platform for teachers’ voices to be heard, so that we can improve the quality of preschool education through active discussion.”

While there is good preschool leadership that listens to their teachers’ concerns, there are also those that do not have a voice—and the group can help to address that, said Mr Koh.

He was inspired to learn more after the birth of his newborn son.

“I started off wanting to know more about children so that I can be a better parent, and in the midst of that, I developed the love of working with children,” he said.

Mr Koh, who is divorced with a 16-year-old son, worked at a private preschool for half a year before moving on to start a private centre with two other partners for over four years.

He then became an early childhood freelance trainer, training other preschool teachers, at the National Trades Union Congress-run Seed Institute and the National Trades Union Congress-run Seed Institute, which runs early childhood education diplomas and degree courses.

Forming the group came hot on the heels of a study commissioned by philanthropic outfit Lien Foundation which ranked Singapore 29th out of 45 countries in standards of early childhood education.

The study, which was released in June, was followed by two other surveys of education experts and parents by the foundation. Both called for the government to take charge of the preschool sector, with an emphasis on regulating fees and training preschool teachers the way it recruits and trains mainstream school teachers.

With such a preschool teachers network in place, there will be a ready pool of participants for future research into the views of preschool teachers, said Mr Koh. He hopes to work with partners such as the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) and the Institute of Early Childhood.

Some hope the teachers in the group, who hold teaching positions in not-for-profit early childhood centres, will find ways to influence the status of teachers.

The network also provides the teachers with another avenue to interact with parents, who are also welcome to join the group. Ms Yip Kwai Heng, 42, who has joined the network, is a centre supervisor at a private childcare centre along Upper East Coast Road. She has spent the past 10 years in the sector.

She said: “We may not be mainstream teachers, but we get the child at their youngest—starting from a stage where they barely know anything.

“I hope that parents will understand the challenges we are facing, so we can all focus on how best to help a child.”

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Mr Philip Koh, who became a preschool teacher 12 years ago, set up the network three weeks ago to talk about issues relating to salary, teacher-student ratio and other early education concerns. PHOTO: DIOS VINCOY JR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

Preschool teachers network launched

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