

## Minnesota teachers are taking initiative and writing a different kind of kid's book

Maya Rao, Star Tribune (2019 article, before our book project with this school.)

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Educators at several St. Paul schools with large Hmong populations struggled to find materials in their own language and with portrayals of Hmong culture and history. So [May Lee Xiong and Bounthavy Kiatoukaysy](#) of Phalen Lake Hmong Studies Magnet School began writing their own and having them published by St. Paul Public Schools. "Zab and Txiv Huab Tais" is about a trickster and a king. "Noj Mov Tshaav Puam" depicts what people eat at a Hmong market — purple sticky rice, deep fried chicken, papaya salad; it is a version of a traditional American book with pizza and ice cream.

"There is a huge need within that area of instruction," said Xiong, a dual immersion coach. "Within the Hmong community there is not a ton of materials, especially for little kids."

With 51 percent of America's public elementary and secondary school children from racial minority groups, educators and parents have raised concerns that the books aimed at them still mostly feature white characters. The [national conversation](#) about bringing more diversity to children's books has taken on additional complexities in the Twin Cities, where children of Somali, Hmong, Karen and Ethiopian immigrants and refugees form large communities that are not well-represented in most of the U.S.

Books reflecting their languages and culture can be hard to find even abroad. Xiong said several teachers went to Laos and Thailand but struggled to find books written in Hmong, even when the characters were Hmong; the language's written form only dates to the 1950s, when it adapted the Roman alphabet.

The St. Paul Public Library took the unusual step several years ago of publishing books that catered to the growing number of Karen refugees, a persecuted ethnic minority from Myanmar, formerly Burma, that came to storytime programs. Karen authors in St. Paul, Win World and Saw Powder, wrote "The Elephant Huggy" and "The Hen and the Badger" in Karen and English. The library followed with "Teach Me to Love," a children's book about adult and baby animals by Denise Brennan-Nelson written in the Ethiopian languages of Oromo and Amharic.