

## Push for diverse characters

This year the library is working to publish a work of Karen folktales and another book of Karen songs.

"It was very important for us to produce and publish books in these languages that were oppressed so they can see the symbolism: Your language is valuable, your language is important, your language is rich, and you can share that language with your child," said community services coordinator Pang Yang.

Teacher Mariam Mohamed has struggled to find books for her students at Dugsi Academy, a St. Paul charter school serving children of East African descent. Though she praised popular Somali folktale books such as "Dhegdheer" and "Wiil Waal," she wanted to see more about the experience of Somali kids growing up in America. But she saw that black characters in books were usually African-American rather than African immigrants.

Mohamed wrote "Ayeeyo's Golden Rule" about a Somali-American girl who overcomes bullying at school. She drew from her upbringing as a young immigrant who wore a hijab in a mostly white school where other Somali students were scarce. Mohamed found solace in reading books growing up but noticed that they didn't reflect her experiences of struggling to fit in with a foreign accent and clothes.

Most of the girls in her classroom at the Dugsi Academy wear hijabs and related to the protagonist Ayeeyo, according to Mohamed. At the request of students, she's working on a book about a Somali-American boy grappling with peer pressure. Her books are in English. "I'm not writing just for students of color," said Mohamed. "African children, white, black, all children deserve to learn about their peers' experience."

Cooperative Children's Book Center at the University of Wisconsin calculated that out of 3,703 children's books it received last year, 402 were about Africans or African-Americans, 52 were about American Indians, 309 were about Asian-Americans and 251 were about Latinos. Center librarian Merri Lindgren said that in the past five or so years, diversity in children's books is staying at the top of conversations in the industry.

"There is certainly lots of room for growth in publishing in those areas and a huge demand for it," said Lindgren. She added: "Sometimes you have to go beyond just the books you might find at Barnes and Noble and you need to find books that smaller publishers are putting out."

Minneapolis-based publisher Lerner Books is working on a range of racially diverse books. Last month, it published "Let 'Er Buck! George Fletcher, the People's Champion," the story of an African-American cowboy, and "I Am Farmer: Growing an Environmental Movement in Cameroon." In October it will publish "A Map into the World," a picture book by Kao Kalia

Yang featuring a Hmong-American girl who seeks out beauty in the world around her and forms a connection with a grieving elderly neighbor.

"We've been increasing our publishing on some of those topic areas," editor in chief Andy Cummings said regarding the region's refugee population.