“We design the experience based on how children learn, not just on what we want them to learn”: Mara Lee Durrell and Melissa Middaugh of Rise Alliance on adapting to local contexts, shifting norms, and reaching children and families where they are.

Rollo Romig
November 22, 2024

Rollo Romig: Could both of you introduce yourselves and share a bit about your background, what brought you to this work, and what you do now?

Mara Lee Durrell: I’m Mara Lee Durrell, Executive Director of what is now Rise Alliance for Children—we just rebranded last month—and I’m still within my first year here. Before this, I spent 10 years running a conflict resolution nonprofit, where I saw the profound impact of conflict on individuals, families, and children. That experience led me to Rise, as I saw how entire lives can be shaped by political issues. I’ve been really impressed with the 28 years of knowledge and best practices this organization has built while working in 20 different countries. There’s a wealth of expertise within the organization, and I see great opportunities to share that.

That’s also why I wanted Melissa to join me today. She’ll introduce herself, but she’s been a key part of this journey, ensuring our work is culturally relevant and context-appropriate while

drawing lessons from the field to apply elsewhere. We've been working closely together on strategy, and Melissa brings invaluable field experience and knowledge that has shaped where we are today.

Melissa Middaugh: I'm Melissa Middaugh, based in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. I've been with Rise Alliance for Children since 2011. I started with the organization in Haiti after the earthquake, developing programs there. Over time, I became Chief Program Officer, working with all our country programs and supporting our local teams to strengthen their efforts. It's an honor to be here with you today.

Rollo Romig: Can you tell me who would you say is Rise Alliance's particular audience? Who are your stakeholders, and who are the primary beneficiaries of what you do?

Melissa Middaugh There are three tiers, following a bit of a Bronfenbrenner model. We see the child at the core of everything we do. For sustainability, we branch out to include the adults around the child—parents or caregivers who directly care for them. Then we move outward to the institutions that impact the child's life, such as schools, teachers, hospitals, clinics, or healthcare facilities. Those three tiers define our focus.

Mara Lee Durrell As we broaden out, it also includes policymakers and ministers of education at the government level. What we're really trying to do is implement proof of concept in the classroom—changing classroom culture and adult behavior to improve the child's experience. We aim to show that this model is both possible and delivers better outcomes. From there, we work toward adoption at the government level.

Rollo Romig: What would you say makes your approach distinct from other groups working in similar areas?

Mara Lee Durrell: I think many organizations in the early childhood development space focus on literacy, numeracy, and measuring success based on those outcomes. What sets us apart is the pre-work needed to improve those learning outcomes—specifically, the trauma-informed approach and emphasis on social-emotional development to ensure a child is ready to learn. We take a holistic view, starting where the child is and making sure they feel safe and truly are safe before moving into academics. While we're also focused on learning outcomes, we recognize that groundwork is essential. For me, the key differentiator in the early childhood learning space is this trauma-informed, holistic approach to the child.

Rollo Romig: Can you share an example that shows the impact of your work?

Mara Lee Durrell: Absolutely. Two impact numbers stand out to me. First, 90% of children who come into our classrooms with learning delays catch up within one year of our programming. This shows the importance of doing the pre-work—especially for children who've had one or more adverse childhood experiences. Trauma rewires the brain, and our program focuses on building resilience to prepare these children for success.

Second, children in our programs are three times more likely to succeed in first grade. First-grade readiness is one of the strongest predictors of lifelong economic opportunities, independence, and overall success. Our program, *Element of Play,* is rooted in the understanding that children learn best through play. We center play as the *how,* not just the *what* or *why*. Play isn't a "nice-to-have," it's essential. We create safe environments where children feel secure in their bodies, build safe attachment with adults, and engage meaningfully with the curriculum.

The program incorporates guided play, free play, and a focus on language development. For example, we use auditory learning, sensory activities, and techniques that help teachers and parents extend the value of a book or concept. If we're teaching shapes, children might feel the shapes, read about them, and explore them through sensory experiences. This approach creates a 360-degree learning environment that goes beyond rote memorization. It ensures children fully engage with and understand concepts. By changing the way we work with children, we're creating conditions where they can thrive and build lifelong skills.

We design the experience based on how children learn, not just on what we want them to learn. It's not just about focusing on outcomes but also considering the inputs. We're equipping teachers with better tools and more strategies, recognizing that children learn in diverse ways. One approach won't work for every child, so teachers need a variety of methods to reach all the children in front of them.

Rollo Romig: Melissa, what would you say is an example that shows the impact of your work?

Melissa Middaugh: One of the things that sets us apart is having all local teams in each country we work in, bringing unique perspectives to their communities. The children in our programs bring with them everything happening at home, in their proximity, and in the broader country.

In Haiti, where many young people can't finish high school and often drop out, we looked at how to create impact beyond just training teachers. We started offering jobs to young adults—18 to 25-year-olds who had dropped out and were unemployed, disengaged, and sitting idle in their communities. We trained them to work with children, supporting preschool teachers in

classrooms that often had 30, 40, or even 100 kids, as we've seen in Ethiopia. Through this training, these young adults gained skills and found purpose. They began supporting teachers and connecting with children, becoming valued members of their communities. Children would greet them by name, and they began to feel like superheroes—rediscovering their value and starting to dream about their futures.

These young people also became informal social workers. They'd notice children not attending school and engage parents, encouraging them to bring their children to the program. In many ways, they became a child protection mechanism, helping to integrate children into the community. This ripple effect went beyond the children—it began changing family values, community norms, and the lives of the young adults working with the kids. While our primary focus is the child, this broader impact on the surrounding adults and community is just as vital.

Rollo Romig: You mentioned working with governments to gain support for your programs. What are those interactions like, and what do you find effective in convincing governments or policymakers to sign on?

Mara Lee Durrell: Two examples come to mind. In Ethiopia, our programs serve 22,000 children daily through government preschools. We show the government the difference in learning outcomes and test scores between our classrooms and schools not yet in our program. The data demonstrates that our interventions align with their goals, helping them achieve their objectives. The government supports us by providing access to schools, dedicated classrooms, and teacher time. In turn, we train their teachers in methods they didn't receive during certification, particularly in play-based learning. This has led to the national curriculum adopting play-based learning as a mandate. While implementation is still underway, we're supporting them in scaling this approach across Ethiopia.

In Bulgaria, the context is very different. Many children, especially in remote areas and among the Roma population, lack access to early learning facilities. These children are often left at home, unsupervised and unsafe, while their parents try to find work. Here, we've used the language of children's rights—something the Bulgarian government supports at the conceptual level—to highlight the gap between their values and the reality on the ground.

This advocacy has led to commitments from the government to build new play and learning centers in underserved areas. These facilities will provide children with access to education, creating safer environments and freeing parents to work. In both contexts, it's about aligning our

work with government priorities and offering policy solutions that address gaps between intention and reality.

Rollo Romig: How do you tune into that? What are ways that you get to know what they want out of the situation?

Mara Lee Durrell: It's really about having locally led teams. As Melissa mentioned, being embedded in the culture and context is key. Our staff on the ground drive their national strategies—they're the ones having conversations and staying in dialogue. They're best positioned to understand and respond to local needs. Our role is to support them as thought partners, strategists, and validators, while also providing resources and curriculum to implement programs. It's about empowering local leaders and trusting their knowledge to lead the way.

Rollo Romig: Tell me more about those local partners and relationships. How do you establish those partnerships and cultivate them over time?

Melissa Middaugh: Staying relevant is always key. Across all our countries, we focus on understanding what's happening in classrooms. We start by asking what tools teachers need, what they lack access to, and how we can support them at their level. Beyond that, we look at the bigger picture. For example, in Ethiopia, the government has mandated play-based learning in preschools but hasn't provided teacher training or resources to implement it. We step in to fill those gaps and constantly adapt our programming to meet those needs.

In Ukraine, we entered in the middle of a war when schools were closed but libraries remained open. We began working in libraries because that's where children and families were. From there, we earned buy-in from library staff and families, which transitioned into referrals when children returned to schools. Now, teachers in Ukraine are finding that many children have gaps in their education and missed developmental milestones after being out of school for a year. Teachers need support to work with these kids—scaffolding their listening and language skills, for example, to help them catch up. It's always about understanding the local context, identifying gaps for teachers, parents, or policymakers, and staying innovative to address those needs.

Rollo Romig: What are some of the other partnerships that you have that maybe you haven't mentioned yet?

Melissa Middaugh: That takes us into a bit of history. When we started, we focused on where children in the highest need were—and at the time, that was often orphanages. In Vietnam, Haiti,

Ethiopia, and Bulgaria, orphanages were very sterile environments where children weren't being talked to, engaged with, or played with. Some of our longest-running partnerships, like those in Vietnam, are still with government-run orphanages.

A spinoff from that was looking at detention centers, where many street children ended up. If you were living on the street, you'd often be swept into a detention center, essentially institutional care, until you turned 16. In Vietnam, some partnerships are still with these orphanages and detention centers. For these kids, we focus on preparing them with social, life, and work skills, ensuring they're protected when they leave. That might include making sure they have birth certificates, reconnecting them with family, and assessing if their family is safe.

Beyond that, we also partner with universities, working with social work interns and young teachers to keep the next generation connected to the realities on the ground. We work with hospitals and clinics, recognizing that some learning gaps stem from health issues like hearing or vision problems. To address this, we train school nurses and build referral networks between teachers, school nurses, clinics, and hospitals. If a teacher identifies a problem in the classroom, they need a clear process to follow—who to report to, how to connect with a clinic, and how to ensure the child receives care. This continuity across institutions and sectors ensures children are supported holistically.

Rollo Romig: What have you learned about tailoring your approach to different cultural contexts? Is there a one-size-fits-all strategy, or do you have to adjust your messaging depending on where you are?

Melissa Middaugh: Play-based learning serves as a universal entry point into communities. Almost everyone agrees that children are important and that they should learn, and play resonates as a natural way for children to engage. However, not everyone immediately understands the value of play. When adapting across cultures, it's about identifying cultural gaps or blind spots that may hinder the best care for children—whether in classrooms, families, or communities. Every culture has its own challenges. In some places, it's corporal punishment in schools. In others, it might be domestic slavery or early marriage. The key is shaping the message so adults can hear and respond to it.

For instance, when addressing corporal punishment, we focus on shifting the culture from fear-based learning to joyful, engaged learning. It's about showing teachers that they don't need to rule through fear, verbal abuse, or hitting. Instead, they can foster respect and discipline through connection and joy. When teachers experience that "aha" moment—realizing they don't

need to maintain a rigid hierarchy to command respect—it's transformative. Working at this deeper societal level requires nuance. We engage with raw emotions and ingrained behaviors. Many of the adults we work with didn't have the chance to play as children themselves, so even this is a new experience for them.

Mara Lee Durrell: Exactly. It's not that these teachers are trying to be authoritarian—it's just what they've seen modeled. We all imitate the behaviors we've experienced. Until teachers have their own transformative moments, we can't expect them to approach things differently.

We always assume best intentions. Teaching isn't a glamorous or well-paid profession anywhere, and teachers themselves may have experienced verbal or physical abuse, both as children and adults. Our staff excels at giving teachers respect and framing our work as offering additional tools to make their jobs easier. When teachers see improved learning outcomes and better classroom behavior, there's a remarkable transformation. Children want to be in class, they respect their teachers, and they genuinely want to learn. That transformation gives teachers renewed pride in their profession and themselves. What's truly profound is seeing how impacting the child starts with changing the behavior of the adults around them. That's where real, lasting change happens.

Rollo Romig: Melissa, you mentioned that some people quickly embrace play-based learning while others are more skeptical. What do you find most effective in convincing the skeptics?

Melissa Middaugh: The most convincing factor is how quickly they see results in their own children. I'll use Ethiopia as an example. The government mandated play-based learning, which was a big shift from what parents were used to. Even in preschool, children were treated like first graders—sitting at desks all day, carrying backpacks, and doing homework. When the government introduced play-based learning, there wasn't an awareness campaign to prepare parents, and many pushed back. Parents were concerned, saying, "I want my child to be a good student and do well in school." Within a week or two of their children starting play-based learning, though, they saw remarkable changes—more language development, joy, and engagement at home. They quickly came back and said, "This is amazing. I had no idea." They just didn't have a reference point for this approach.

Mara Lee Durrell: A broader challenge for the play-based movement is the misconception that play is frivolous or a luxury—something fun, but not serious. There's this idea that play isn't "real work." By incorporating play into classrooms, we're lifting it up as the essential work of children. Both guided play and free play are crucial. We work to help people understand that play is not a

luxury—it's a right. Play is how children learn, and it's vital for their development. Entire societies benefit when we make play a priority. Adults often struggle with this concept because many don't know how to play themselves. They may have fond memories of free play but didn't experience play in the classroom, so they lack examples or modeling of how it works. Once people see proof of concept—when they witness the results firsthand—there's a high rate of adoption. Play-based learning moves from being a "nice to have" to a "must-have."

Rollo Romig: What's an example of something you tried that didn't work out as hoped, but taught you something valuable moving forward?

Melissa Middaugh: We often turn our failures into successes, but there have been missteps along the way. For instance, in Ethiopia, we initially started our own preschool to prove the value of play-based learning. It allowed us to control the environment, implement the approach, and showcase it to government officials. For four years, we ran a preschool with 72 children annually, employing 15 teachers, a cook, and providing breakfast.

While it succeeded in demonstrating the model, it was an expensive way to reach a small number of children. When COVID hit, we realized it wasn't sustainable. That prompted a shift to implementing play-based learning in government schools. Now, the knowledge we gained running our own preschool has translated into a scalable model that reaches far more children effectively. In Vietnam, our initial focus was working with children with disabilities in specialized schools and orphanages. We then expanded to after school sessions to introduce play-based learning. While it took longer than we'd hoped to get buy-in at the preschool level, persistence eventually brought us into the schools. Progress sometimes takes longer than expected, but we adapt and refine along the way. We've also learned that behavior change doesn't happen with a single training session. In many of our partnerships, we've worked with schools for over a decade. Now we're reflecting on how long it actually takes to go from the start of a partnership to full adoption of new behaviors. We're exploring whether it's a three-year process and how to improve sustainability, rather than continuing indefinitely without clear milestones.

Implementation is cyclical. You try something, monitor it, evaluate whether it achieved the desired outcome, and refine.

Mara Lee Durrell: Part of the beauty of our work is that programs are highly tailored to local needs, so they naturally adapt to different cultures and contexts. However, as we focus on identifying the most efficient, high-impact model, challenges arise. For example, funders often prefer simple, scalable programs that fit neatly into a box. That hasn't been our approach, but

we're learning to balance scaling deeply with positioning ourselves to scale more broadly. It's about continuing to do what we do best, adapting to local needs, while refining our model to meet the immense demand for our work.

Rollo Romig: Aside from funding, what would you say are the biggest challenges you face in this work, and how have you tackled them?

Melissa Middaugh: One of the biggest challenges is that when you're deeply embedded in a community, working with children and families, you start to see the needs on a much deeper level, but you can't always meet them. It's an ongoing effort to empower our teams to support these needs, even if we can't solve everything financially. Take Haiti, for example. Education isn't free. Preschool and the senior year of high school are the most expensive years, which is why very few kids have access to preschool or graduate from high school. On top of that, families face challenges like gang violence, overcrowded households, and hunger. While our focus is on early childhood, we take a whole-child approach. A child can't learn if they're hungry or not in the classroom.

This is where partnerships become invaluable. We can't solve all of these issues alone. We constantly ask, who are we connected to in each country that can help? Who are our strongest advocates? Can we collaborate on grants or create effective referral pipelines? Sometimes, it's about having an emergency fund to address urgent needs. However, we're not a one-stop shop, and we recognize our limits. It's especially hard when you know the child or family by name, and you multiply that need across eight countries and tens of thousands of children. It can feel overwhelming. What keeps us going is knowing that we're part of a larger ecosystem. There are so many dedicated organizations and people driving toward positive change, and together, we're making an impact.

Mara Lee Durrell: We see our role as creating culture shifts in every classroom—changing the behavior of adults, fostering stronger connections between parents and children, and building safe school environments. We view ourselves as part of a much larger movement aimed at ensuring children have access to all their rights. While we're doing our part with specific interventions, we also recognize that we can't fix everything alone. As Melissa said, we're just one piece of this broader effort. Our work has a ripple effect. It starts with connection, building bonds between adults and children. Connection is protection. That philosophy is central to what we do. It's both a challenge and a guiding principle that keeps us grounded in the bigger picture.

Melissa Middaugh: We need to be connected to feel protected. COVID was a big learning lesson in this regard, both in the US and globally. I'm also the chairman of the board for our local Child Advocacy Center, and I conduct interviews with children who've been sexually or physically abused. When you're isolated without connection to your family, neighbors, or community, you're more likely to fall through the cracks. Staying connected to each other lifts all of us up. It truly does protect.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much. This has been really informative.

Rollo Romig: (he/him) is a freelance journalist who writes most often for The New York Times and The New Yorker. He is the author of the book I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India. He teaches writing at The New School in New York City. He was born and raised in Detroit.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*