

# An Investigation into the Social Factors that Influence Sport Participation: A Case of Gymnastics in the Western Cape

W. C. Lucas, S. Titus, M. E. M. Young

**Abstract**—Gymnastics is the umbrella term that represents seven different and unique disciplines of gymnastics. Men and women of all ages and abilities practice this sport, and participation in gymnastics can develop both gross and fine motor skills, strength, flexibility, coordination and balance. There are various social factors, such as a family's socioeconomic status or accessibility to sports facilities that may play a role in affecting levels of participation. The aim of this study is to investigate the social factors that have an influence on gymnastics participation in the Western Cape. To this end, a qualitative approach is adopted to collect data. This study also adopts the ecological systems theory as the theoretical framework, and is used to analyze and interpret current social factors that directly or indirectly influence participation in gymnastics. The study's objectives were to ascertain which social factors hinder participation, and which social factors promote participation, thus, coaches, parents and gymnasts participated in focus group discussions. Key informant interviews took place with experts in the field of gymnastics in the Western Cape. A thematic analysis was conducted on transcriptions from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Social factors investigated in this study occurred in the chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem, and had both a direct and indirect influence on the gymnast's continued participation. These systems are defined as the environment of the individual, in which they grow and develop. The research findings of this paper are used to draw conclusions and make specific recommendations for practice and further research. The information gathered in this study can assist all stakeholders within the field of gymnastics, such as parents, judges, coaches, gymnasts, and the supporting community which surround the participating gymnast.

**Keywords**—Developing child, ecological systems theory, facilities, federation, gymnastics, influence, participation, social factors, socioeconomic status, sport

## I. INTRODUCTION

**G**YMNASTICS is a form of physical activity, and is an all-inclusive sport code that develops basic motor skills, hand-eye coordination and provides gymnasts an opportunity to socialize and learn new skills [2], [3]. The Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG) is the oldest international sports federation. Established in 1881, the FIG has participated in the modern Olympic Games since its revival in 1896. The revival of the Olympic Games was majorly influenced by Baron

Pierre De Coubertin (1863-1937), at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century [1]. At present, the FIG has grown to host and govern seven disciplines of gymnastics namely; Mens's Artistic Gymnastics, Women's Artistic Gymnastics, Rhythmic Gymnastics, Aerobic Gymnastics, Acrobatic Gymnastics, Trampoline Gymnastics, and Gymnastics for All. Each of these gymnastics disciplines requires the participant to perform exercises, skills and routines at competitions, with high levels of strength, balance and control [4].

We are told that participation in sport provides young children and adolescents with an opportunity to develop on a physical, mental, and social domain, thus resulting in the experience of many health benefits [5]. Gymnastics is an excellent vehicle for the teaching basic motor skills and promoting health-related fitness in children of all ages [6], [7]. Adopting and leading a physically active lifestyle can assist in the prevention of heart diseases, obesity, cancer, osteoporosis, diabetes type 2, and depression [8]. These well-known advantages are experienced by people who participate in sport and physical activity, and it would appear that a lack of physical activity may result in being at higher risk for coronary heart disease and other chronic conditions known as diabetes. Habitual physical activity contributes to an all-round quality of life, psychological health and increases the ability to participate in activities at work, and during leisure time [9]. Additionally, participation in physical activities and sports among young people promotes social well-being, physical and mental health, academic achievement and skills such as team work, self-discipline and socialization [10].

Gymnastics is one such activity; however, participation in gymnastics requires sufficient disposable income in order to afford the costs of membership fees, apparel and kit, equipment necessary for participation, and transport to and from training and competition venues. One of the major benefits of gymnastics activity is that the gymnast's body experiences a wide variety of shapes, movement patterns, spatial changes and loadings (muscular and non-muscular) – all providing engaging and beneficial kinesthetic stimuli. Participating in gymnastics provides a unique movement experience not duplicated in any other human activity [3].

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The gymnastics-learning environment includes the gymnasium, the apparatus and the equipment used during training. Gymnastics is unique in human movement in that it demands complex gravity defying body movements that require specific joint actions to be carefully aligned with the gymnast's space, direction, time and rhythm. The fundamental motor patterns, experienced by children participating in gymnastics are: static shapes and static-dynamic balance, jumping and landing, rolling, turning and twisting, hopping, skipping and galloping, crawling and climbing, and stepping and leaping [3].

There are many potential factors, which could play a role in the hindrance or promotion of participation in sport, in the environment and within society. The developing child is dependent on his/her parents or guardians to provide for him/her [11]. One of the most prominent factors that stimulate and maintain an individuals' participation in physical activity and sport is accessibility and availability, on a social and environmental domain. There are many broad influences upon physical activity behaviour including intra-personal, social, environmental factors and these determinants vary across the life course [12]. In many communities, it is known that boredom and inactivity among children who do not participate in sport can lead to experimentation with drugs and alcohol on the streets, also referred to as "substance abuse". Sport can be an antidote to those that tend to become vulnerable to participate in negative social activities such as; cigarette smoking, substance abuse (drug or alcohol use), theft, breaking and entering, to name a few [13].

This study aims to investigate the current social factors that may have an influence on participation in gymnastics for the developing child, and highlight the various reasons that children participate in gymnastics, in the Western Cape. The benefits experienced by gymnasts include increased flexibility, enhanced general health, as well as improved postural control. Children participating in gymnastics benefit from improved cognition and become masters of academic activities and task orientations. Participation in gymnastics enables a child to experience a higher ability to focus on academics and sporting activities, thus, benefits the participating gymnast with goal setting and achievement thereof [3].

Participation in sport is important for physical, mental and socio-emotional growth of children. Prolonged physical inactivity can pose a threat to livelihood due to conditions such poor joint mobility and functionality, back pain due to poor posture alignment, and psychosocial problems [14]. Adolescents are encouraged to engage in three or more sessions per week of physical activities for at least 20 min or more and that require moderate to vigorous levels of exertion [15]. Limited accessibility to gymnastics may be one of the barriers to active participation, indirectly preventing participation, as well as poorly maintained equipment and facilities which limit effective training in gymnastics; therefore this investigation can be used to assist clubs, coaches, sport government and federations with information regarding the social factors that promote participation, and the social factors that hinder participation in gymnastics.

There may be no positive influence through participation in

physical activity and sport. Sport provides many opportunities for socializing, physical activity participation and exertion, as well as fitness and skills development. Sport also creates an area for a child to physically and mentally develop and experiment with their skills and their abilities. Participation in sport provides participants with an opportunity to learn life skills such as team work, leadership, game plan and strategy, healthy competition and sportsmanship. A lack in participation in sport and physical activity may result in a child having neither the opportunity to pass time positively, nor the opportunity to develop and learn physical, mental, and sport-specific life skills, vital for development. Thus, the problem of this study is to examine and interpret the social factors that exist which may hinder, or promote participation in gymnastics in order to provide insight into these social factors. Stakeholders within the gymnastics fraternity may use the information gathered to improve systems and continue to find lucrative methods of making participation in gymnastics possible for all, align efforts, funding and human resources to promote continued participation, as well as to promote the benefits of sport participation, thus creating a community of active and healthy children, mentally and physically, resulting in increased participation in gymnastics and enabling children to develop sport-specific life skills. In turn, an increase in participation in sport may possibly create a decrease in negative social activity and behaviour taking place within communities around the Western Cape among children and adolescents.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of this study, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory will be used in order to explain the complexities of the phenomenon being investigated. The purpose of the theoretical framework is to provide the author with an approach to interpret a subject of study, and provides the reader with a lens to view the phenomenon under investigation [16]. A visual depiction of the Ecological Systems Theory details the different systems found within society [17], with the individual/developing child at the centre of a group five concentric circles, namely; the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. This theory focuses on the development of a child within the environment he/she grows. This theory maintains that the environment and society have an influence on the socialization of the child during development. The most immediate agency within the child's environment is the household he/she grows up in, and the family that surrounds the child. Any changes or conflicts that occur within the child's environment will have a ripple effect throughout other layers [18].

This study will view the gymnasts' maturing body, the gymnasium/gymnastics club, immediate family, gymnastics community, home and family, neighbourhood, school, religious institution as well as community as factors that form part of the microsystem, which influence the development of the child, thus, contributing to factors which may influence participation in gymnastics. Factors within the each of the systems affect an

individual in various ways.

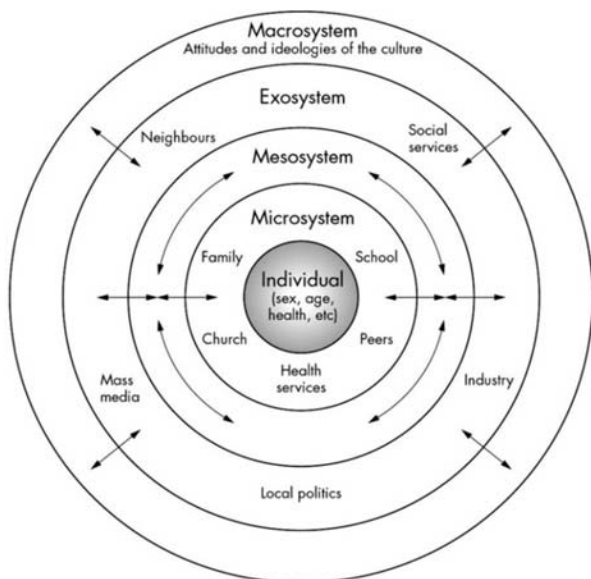


Fig. 1 Ecological Systems Theory [17]

### III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative approach was considered to be the most appropriate for this study because it allows for the exploration of the participant's understanding of the social factors that influence their participation in gymnastics. In addition, it provides the space for participants in this study (coaches, gymnasts and parents), to explain their experiences and perceptions of their social factors and their participation in gymnastics in their own words. "The interpretive position assumes that the world is constantly being constricted through group interactions, and thus, social reality can be understood via the perspectives of social actors enmeshed in meaning making activities" [19]. The epistemological and ontological position of this study adopts an interpretive stance and to this end, the aim of the researcher was to understand and interpret the meaning of human interactions which is an underpinning philosophy of interpretivist research [19].

### IV. RESEARCH SETTING

This research took place in different locations in and around the city of Cape Town. Mostly, research was conducted in gymnastics clubs, which are also known as gymnasiums. The gymnastics clubs that participated in this research was Giants gymnastics which has two branches, Giants gymnastics club in Mitchells Plain, and Giants gymnastics club in Blouberg.

### V. POPULATION AND SAMPLING

Gathering data is crucial in research as the data is meant to contribute to the understanding of the theoretical framework utilized in this study [20]. Purposive sampling was utilized as the sampling method for this study. "Purposive sampling is synonymous with qualitative research" [21]. Participants of this study comprised of gymnasts, parents of gymnasts and coaches

of gymnasts. The type of purposive sampling, which this study adopted for the collection of data, was criterion sampling.

Criterion purposive sampling involves searching for individuals who meet a particular criterion or who have had particular life experiences in a certain area [21]. Key informants were selected based on their experience and long service commitment to the Western Cape Gymnastics Association and the South African Gymnastics Federation.

TABLE I  
 TOTAL PARTICIPANTS OF THE STUDY

Gymnastics Club	n
<b>GIANTS GYMNASTICS MITCHELLS PLAIN</b>	
Gymnasts	6
Coaches	4
Parents	6
<b>GIANTS GYMNASTICS BLOUBERG</b>	
Gymnasts	8
Coaches	.*
Parents	6
<b>KEY INFORMANTS</b>	
Key Informant 1	1
Key Informant 2	1
Key Informant 3	1
Key Informant 4	1
<b>n=</b>	<b>34</b>

### VI. DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected from coaches, parents and gymnasts from a gymnastics club located in the West Coast and a gymnastics club located in the Cape Flats of Cape Town using focus group discussions and key informant interviews as the methods for data collection, with a purposively selected sample. Predetermined themes, based on the theoretical framework, guides the study. These methods provided the opportunity for participants to express their interpretations, experiences, opinions and perceptions of participation in gymnastics, physical education, sports and recreation in their community [22]. Focus group discussions are a form of group interview that facilitates communication between research participants in order to generate data [23].

### VII. DATA ANALYSIS

Once the data were collected, the researcher commenced analyzing the data. The voice recordings were played back and transcriptions of interviews and focus group discussions became the primary documents from which an analysis was performed to identify codes, themes and subthemes. The researcher made use of a thematic analysis. "Thematic analysis is, locating it in relation to other qualitative analytic methods that search for themes or patterns, and in relation to different epistemological and ontological positions" [24].

For the purposes of this study, data were analyzed using a theoretical thematic analysis for both the key informant interviews and focus group discussions using the Ecological Systems Theory as a lens for interpretation of data to align key concepts/themes that may arise in this study. Data were analyzed using qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti

version 7.5.7, which assisted the researcher to collate and group codes.

## VIII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion, which follows herewith, begins with a summary of the section of the theoretical framework, theme, as well as a summary of the findings. Thereafter, the discussion will elaborate on the findings presented in the summary. To this end, the findings were based on data collected from focus group interviews with gymnastics coaches, parents and gymnasts relating to factors that promote participation, as experienced by them. Arising from the thematic analysis of the focus group interviews, themes within each system of the theoretical framework have emerged. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of the participants in this study.

### A. Chronosystem

The chronosystem includes the dimension of time within the environment; as well as the developmental transitions, which take place over the life course of the person [26].

#### • Change in Participation in Gymnastics over a Period of Time

A parent participant, Natalie, expressed that she has witnessed an increase in participation in gymnastics because she had been one of the first parents of the club when it opened. Take for example this quote describing her initial experience regarding an increase in participation, noticed over a period of time:

*“Watching the club, you know being one of the earlier... probably the veteran parents around the table... I mean when the club started it started with five, six kids...and literally I mean it's sitting now over a hundred or close to one hundred and fifty...I mean all the way...all the way through... Tiny tots, all the way. I mean from my experience at competitions those numbers also have grown you know...the competitions are taking longer too... the duration...the event lasts for longer and there's a whole lot more that needs to be fitted in, so I think more kids are taking up the sport”.*

The observation of an increase in gymnastics participation at club level can be supported with the results provided from a national survey in 2005 for South Africa's 2014 report card on physical activity for children and youth [30]. The results of the survey indicate that one-half of adolescents were participating in one form of organized sport.

In retrospect, parents and key informants shared, that due to a change experienced in the South African constitution, “...gymnastics was never, to put it this way a “coloured” sport, it was a white sport”, says Damon, a parent participant in this study. Rachel, another expert in gymnastics, shares the same sentiments by reporting that, “Because they were forced to and they had to change. So I think, it's good that everybody is included.” Cristina, one of the identified experts in gymnastics, also supports sentiments expressed by Damon and Rachel, and reported her experience with regard to an increase in participation due to inclusion as a result of the change in South

African policy, saying:

*“so if we go back to the eighties, like gymnastics was in all the white schools and most of the coloured schools from my understanding, but their participation was very separate, so you know, you had your white kids that would train, you know that would compete in all the federation activities and then you would have the coloured and maybe some black kids who would participate in very much the USSASA's school programmes and it was kind of very separate, and then, you know with the change in South African history 1994/5, SAGF made a very concerted effort to bring everybody together so you know, I think from that point of view now you get everybody involved in the federation and also the demise and the fall of USSASA means that it was really only the federations activities that were going on.”.*

The demise of the apartheid regime and its oppressive legislation meant that the first democratically elected government in 1994 had to embark on an inclusive process to establish unified sport policy, practice and governing institutions [29]. This literature is consistent with the experience of participants in this study with regard to inclusive participation due to a change in the South African Constitution which took place in 1994.

### B. Macrosystem

The macrosystem is composed of cultural values, customs, and laws [25]. For the purpose of this study, this system was used to explore opinions and beliefs pertaining to attitudes, ideologies and beliefs, including preconceived stereotypes, experienced in gymnastics. The following theme emerged within the macrosystem, stereotypes and preconceived beliefs about the sport of gymnastics.

#### • Stereotypes and Preconceived Beliefs about the Sport of Gymnastics

The concept of stereotypes and beliefs about gymnastics will be discussed, and direct quotes from data collected are displayed along with literature that supports the experiences of participants. Rachel expressed her experiences around weight and the notion that overweight people cannot participate in gymnastics and shared that it is believed that,

*“Fat people can't do gymnastics'... We need to stop that, we need to encourage them, because that's what they need. Because you find coaches, and I can also be guilty of that sometimes, but coaches are not going to worry because that child is never going to do that... but like I would do with the disability, work on their ability.”*

Rachel elaborated that coaches can assist in encouraging physical activity participation in gymnastics because participating is not only fun, it also helps with weight control and living a healthy lifestyle. During another key informant interview, Cristina mentioned that she knew that there was a stereotype that, “rhythmic is for really tall, skinny girls, so you know black African girls might say well it is not possible.” This appeared to be one of the leading stereotypes contributing to a barrier in participation in gymnastics, where it has been

expressed that gymnastics can contribute to weight loss if people could see past these stigmas and stereotypes.

### C. Exosystem

The exosystem is part of a larger system that indirectly influences the individual but is beyond their control (e.g., a parent's workplace—a child has no direct influence on the mother's employment).

- National and Provincial Government Support to the Gymnastics Federation

Faye, a key informant of the study, expressed that she has witnessed government support in an area known as Mass Participation. She mentioned in the following quote that,

*"...there was this thing I always said that there's money for Mass Participation. But to get Mass on board, it needs money, government always said that they will provide the money for mass participation."*

Mass participation has been proven to get more people active and participating in sport than any other form of participation and is one of Sport and Recreation South Africa's main focus areas.

### D. Mesosystem

The mesosystem links the individual's microsystems together, such as a home and workplace, or home and gymnastics club. For the purpose of this study, this theme is used to explore and interpret the links present in the developing child's microsystems and how they interact with each other. In this section, a parent's facilitation and contribution to a gymnast's participation at the club and a parent's involvement with fundraising will be presented as the mesosystem for the developing child.

- Family facilitation and support at gymnasium and gymnastics competitions.

A sub-theme, which emerged from the focus group interviews and key informant interviews, is the importance of support by parents and their involvement with the gymnastics club and competition. This broad sub-theme encompasses a parent's direct facilitation financially, and most importantly, morally. Parents facilitate their child's participation in gymnastics as they initially make the choices on behalf of their children. This is expressed hereunder by Renee:

*"we initially put Maggie into gymnastics for the strength and just the general physical development of gymnastics I think is brilliant for children and for agility"*

In the same focus group discussion, Brent reports that,

*"I think the development of their strength, their motor skills, and also discipline, you know, what they're being taught here, I think it stems from the home and also then gets added here in the class room so I think physical development, discipline, the strengths which she mentioned before, and competitiveness; it's sort of a mixture that gymnastics sort of gives you and all round..."*

It was found that parents are aware of the physical benefits of physical activity within the sport of gymnastics. Parents expressed that they wanted a place for their child to learn basic

motor skills and develop physically within a safe and monitored sporting context such as the gymnastics club. Their support was also noted as an important factor for the developing child's enjoyment of the sport.

Parents also expressed in a focus group discussion that the cost of participation in gymnastics increased as their gymnasts continued participating, year after year. In essence, Natalie expressed that extra classes, apparel and travelling increase in price. She says:

*"As your kid progresses, the fees become more expensive and it is a, you know if you add up over the year what you could potentially have spent on classes, kits, competitions and if you are "cursed" with two kids, it can be very expensive.*

*And when they have to go to out of town competitions, we've got to fund it ourselves and then if you're also unfortunate enough that none of them are in Cape Town, then you actually then have to seriously reconsider, because there is only so much bread you can't buy. And I think that could be a huge factor for continuing"*

Participants reported that expenses within the sport continued to increase, as participation continued to progress. Participant's quarterly membership fees increased, as well as the cost of apparel, equipment, choreography, and competition fees. It was expressed that the list of fees within gymnastics seemed endless, because their gymnast needed more than one leotard. Leotards are outsourced and are uniquely designed. Often, gymnasts needed sound and music software specialists to cut their floor music for their routines. As participation continued, the costs increased as well.

### E. Microsystem

At the microsystem level, the individual regularly comes in contact with the immediate environment, which includes family, friends, colleagues, and others. For the purpose of this study, the gymnastics club forms part of the developing child's microsystem. This system is used to explore the structures that form the developing child's microsystem; how they serve to provide opportunity for participation in gymnastics for the developing child, and how hindrances to participation occur.

- Importance of Gymnastics and the Gymnastics Club

Coaches, parents and key informants expressed that gymnastics is a good sport for social inclusion, that the gymnastics club is a great place to make friends and for the gymnast to develop social skills by interacting with other gymnasts whilst at training. Parents and key informants agreed that gymnastics was a great sport to teach the growing child discipline and to keep children active and out of mischief due to being occupied with learning skills and spending time constructively.

Key informant Rachel stated:

*"Gymnastics is so good for sport, because you can't do it without being disciplined, you'll cause injuries, you'll do major harm. Its coordination, it helps kids with simple, simple coordination. If you look around, gymnastics is everywhere."*

Rachel mentioned that without having discipline in the sport of gymnastics, injuries were likely to occur. It was reported that, the rates of injury in gymnastics is a serious problem. Injury is reported to be harmful therefore all safety programs involve the prevention of unintentional threats of harm to the gymnast. Thus, safety and injury prevention are linked by intentional countermeasures in order to prevent the threat and likelihood of an injury, and reduce the damages that accompany injury [27].

During the focus group discussion held with coaches, Davina expressed that participation in gymnastics had a positive influence on the growing child, and that the gymnastics club was a place where gymnasts could model a specific future for themselves by learning skills. Davina elaborated by saying:

*"I would say that just the fact that being in a gym and being around positive people, I would say that that influences them already, to a point of like comparing with maybe what they might see in their community, people on the streets smoking...and then actually being in the gym and knowing that I want to be like Nicole, she's coaching, she's studying, she's going forward with her life, not just being there and not indulging in..."*

Here, Davina also describes how participating in gymnastics positively influences and supports the gymnast's reasons to continue participation based on the example of people in the gymnastics club, who are coaching and teaching and sharing knowledge and information about the sport to their gymnasts.

#### F. Individual

The Ecological Systems Theory (EST) states that "individuals are embedded within environments with which they interact to influence development. Individuals actively process and construct beliefs and perceptions of their environments and, in turn, interact with their surroundings based on those beliefs or perceptions" [26].

#### • Physical, Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Benefits of Gymnastics

The perspectives from gymnasts, coaches, parents and key informants will be discussed accordingly. It was expressed by participants that gymnastics is a great sport for motor skills development, discipline, commitment and self-awareness. Key informants, Lexie and Cristina elaborated in the quotes to follow. Cristina expressed that parents put their children into gymnastics because it is a good foundation sport to learn co-ordination and discipline. In the following excerpt, Cristina shared that:

*"I think parents like their kids to do gymnastics, because it's an all-round activity, so they learn you know, great co-ordination, they learn discipline, they learn to work as an individual, they learn to work in a team, I think it keeps them focused, and from a physical aspect it keeps them busy and I think it's one of the few sports that really works on almost everything, and it's a very good foundation sport, so ja, I would think that."*

Lexie shared similar sentiments to Cristina and expressed that:

*"Kids need it for anything, from a discipline point of view, from a self-awareness point of view, from a strength point of view, so there's just a lot out there that the kids can get hold of so there's a lot of sports that they can choose, whether they are going to choose gymnastics or not."*

Lexie and Cristina acknowledged the benefits of participating in gymnastics for the developing child. These benefits allow the child to become skilled physically, increase strength and improve coordination. In this sub-theme, an emphasis is placed on the concept of learning. One of the benefits outlined by Cristina was that it kept children busy and occupied as well. Lexie elaborated by stating that:

*"They grow in strength, flexibility, self-awareness. It's just been so good for everybody and as I said it's grounding for all sports so they come in and they can do gymnastics and it will increase their flexibility for their karate, or their strength for their swimming. It's just really good for anybody to participate from a real young age, and I think that it would just benefit everybody if they come and do it."*

Lexie expressed that she thought that everybody could benefit from the fundamental skills that gymnastics teaches the developing child. It is stated that sport and play are so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child [28]. It is further reported that participation in play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. He mentions that play is important to healthy brain development [28]. The relationship between children and sport activities appears to be a critical factor in psychological, physical, and emotional growth.

The developing child experiences benefits that can only evolve through sport participation, during which socialization patterns are established through frequent contact with peer and coaches at the gymnastics club. Due to continued training and the learning of skills in the gymnastics club, musculoskeletal growth and development occur.

## IX. CONCLUSION

The first system highlighted the participant's experiences with regard to a change in participation observed over a period of time. Both external and internal elements exist within this system, for example, an external element can be the timing of a parent's death, and an example of an internal element can be the physiological changes that occur in the body as a person grows. In this study, the chronosystem was used to describe and interpret changes within society and the environment that the developing child finds himself, or herself in. Findings indicate that participants in this study experienced a positive change in participation in gymnastics over a period of time, as an increase in children participating in gymnastics has been witnessed or observed by parents, coaches and key informants at club and provincial level. According to participants in this study, this is due to the change in the South African Constitution in 1994. Therefore, it is found that there has been an increase in

participation as a direct result of the Republic of South Africa becoming a democratic country and that access to gymnastics is easier.

The second system, macrosystem, highlighted participant's experiences with regard to gymnastics-related stereotypes, and preconceived beliefs around participation in gymnastics, as well as gymnastics as a basis for other sport codes. Stereotypes were found to exist in the sport of gymnastics. The stereotype experienced more frequently was that gymnastics is for a certain body-type. It is found that stereotypes of gymnastics can have a negative influence on participation as it creates a sense of exclusion, whereas gymnastics is for anyone and everyone. The third system, exosystem, highlighted participant's experiences with regard to transportation within a certain area/demographic region, national and provincial government support to the gymnastics federation as well as federation support to clubs and gymnastics participants. It was found that Government supports the gymnastics federation on a national and provincial level with regards to funding and equipment. It was reported by participants, specifically key informants, that Government makes provision and supports the federations activities to increase participation through mass participation. It was also found that Government supports the federation by subsidizing one of the registration categories, namely: School-Sport Gymnastics. This category (Category D) is free to any school-going pupil, participating in gymnastics at their school. This gymnast may compete in Inter-School League competitions, which are also fully subsidized by the National Government of Sport, Sport and Recreation South Africa (SRSA).

The fourth system, mesosystem, highlighted the connections between microsystems of the gymnast. For example, the parent's involvement in the gymnasium or the gymnasium coaches visiting the gymnast's school for talent identification. It was found that, a parents' social position is one of the main factors influencing participation in gymnastics. An additional finding was that a parent essentially decides which sport to let their children engage in, and that the affordability to participate in a certain sport is pre-determined by a parent's social position. The fifth system, microsystem, highlighted participant's experiences with regard to the gymnasium and the importance of participating in gymnastics. Gymnasts in this study expressed that they experienced the sport of gymnastics to be a fun sport. It was shared that the physical activity was a good way to learn skills and participate in competitions. Parents agreed that gymnastics was a great opportunity for their children to make friends outside of school. Gymnasts expressed that travelling together with their gymnast peers to competitions, was an experience they would want to repeat every year because of the places they are able to visit, together. It was found that the interpersonal relationships which developed in the gymnastics club, for both the parents and gymnasts, contributed to the gymnastics club having a "home-like" environment, which influenced continued participation. The sixth system, the individual, highlighted the gymnast-participants viewpoints and experiences with regard to their actively participating in gymnastics. Experiences with regard to

the benefits of participating in gymnastics, from the perception and view of the gymnast, gave rise to the following key findings:

1. Benefits are experienced on a socio-emotional level.
2. Gymnastics is important for physical skills development.
3. The motivation received from the coach and parent/guardian, plays a role in the motivation of the gymnast and has a positive influence on perseverance.

Gymnasts that participated in the focus group discussions shared that by participating in gymnastics, they began to experience improvements and positive changes in the way they relate to their peers, and in how they felt about themselves. All gymnasts shared sentiments regarding a "boosted self-esteem" through participation in gymnastics. It was found that gymnasts learned and grew in confidence to perform because the regular practice of routines in the gymnasium led to improved skills and abilities. Participating in gymnastics also provided gymnasts the opportunity to meet other children who shared the same passion for gymnastics.

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