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Article

Quality of Work Life, Job Satisfaction, and Absenteeism Among School Support Staff: Implications for Occupational Health and Workforce Well-Being

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Highlights

What are the main findings?

- Job satisfaction is strongly and positively associated with quality of work life among operational assistants in public schools.
- Quality of work life is significantly and negatively related to absenteeism, whereas job satisfaction shows a non-significant association with absenteeism.

What are the implications of the main findings?

- Improving working conditions, psychosocial support, and organizational climate can effectively reduce absenteeism in school support staff.
- School management strategies should explicitly include Operational Assistants in HR policies, with a focus on well-being, recognition, and gender-sensitive interventions.

Abstract

Background/Objectives: Operational Assistants (OAs), as non-teaching staff responsible for playground supervision and school hygiene, play a vital role in ensuring safe and well-organized school environments. Despite their importance, research on their working conditions, job satisfaction, and well-being remains limited. This study aims to examine the quality of work life (QoWL) and job satisfaction (JS) of OAs in public schools in the Municipality of Setúbal, Portugal, and to explore their relationship with absenteeism. **Methods:** A quantitative research design was adopted using a survey questionnaire administered to Operational Assistants (N = 119). Data were collected on QoWL, job satisfaction, and absenteeism indicators to assess patterns and relationships among these variables. **Results:** Findings indicate that OAs experience significant challenges related to working conditions and health risks, which are associated with higher levels of absenteeism. Nonetheless, many participants report valuing the stability associated with public-sector employment. **Conclusions:** The results highlight the need for targeted interventions, including improved working conditions, enhanced training, and mental health support, to reduce absenteeism and promote employee well-being. This study contributes to a better understanding of an often-overlooked workforce and offers practical implications for policymakers and school administrators aiming to foster more supportive and sustainable school environments.

Keywords: quality of work life; occupational health; job satisfaction; absenteeism; school support staff; abseenteism; well-being

1. Introduction

Operational Assistants (OAs), non-teaching staff who perform cleaning activities and general students supervision outside of the classroom in schools are crucial to the efficient functioning of public schools, serving as the backbone of daily operations and creating a secure environment for students and staff [1]. Despite their critical role, their well-being, job satisfaction (JS), and working conditions are often overshadowed by broader educational priorities, leaving a gap in understanding the factors influencing their professional experiences. In particular, the lack of institutional recognition and limited career progression opportunities may contribute to lower motivation and engagement among OAs. High absenteeism among this group exacerbates challenges in maintaining consistent school operations, raising concerns about workforce sustainability and school effectiveness [2]. This concern is consistent with evidence showing that work-related stress, JS, and happiness at work are strongly shaped by organizational conditions and directly influence outcomes such as absenteeism and productivity [3,4].

Over the years, research has highlighted the significant influence of working conditions and JS on absenteeism across various occupational groups, including educational support staff [1,5]. Studies have consistently shown that factors such as workplace environment, job stability, and support systems play pivotal roles in determining employee retention and attendance [2]. Prior research further demonstrates that work overload, ambiguity, and role conflict, as key organizational stressors, significantly affect JS and well-being, with direct implications for absenteeism [3]. JS also impacts organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) among school staff: Shrestha and Bhattarai [6] found that greater JS fosters OCB, which in turn enhances staff productivity, commitment, and school effectiveness – even among non-teachers like OAs. However, the specific dynamics affecting OAs in public schools, remain underexplored. Existing literature largely centers on educators and administrative staff, neglecting the unique challenges faced by OAs, who often deal with physically demanding tasks, unpredictable workloads, and a lack of structured professional development pathways [1].

This oversight presents a critical gap in the research. Their perspectives on JS and Quality of Work Life (QoWL) remain under-addressed. Previous studies indicate that JS is linked to collegial relationships, supervision, and career advancement [2]. School climate and leadership support have also been shown to reduce absenteeism and enhance JS among non-teaching staff [7,8]. In this regard, happiness and motivation at work - shaped by working conditions and organizational climate - have been shown to interact positively, reinforcing the need for workplace environments that foster both well-being and engagement [9].

In parallel, QoWL – encompassing working conditions, interpersonal dynamics, workload balance, and growth opportunities – has been positively linked to motivation, retention, and well-being among school staff [10,11]. Recent work by Hussain and Hussain [12] adds that workplace spirituality, particularly compassion, plays a key role in reducing occupational stress and fostering happiness at work. Moreover, evidence from diverse professional settings shows strong associations between high QoWL, increased JS, and reduced absenteeism [13–15].

To address this gap, this study investigates QoWL and JS among OAs in Setúbal, Portugal, and examines their relationships with absenteeism, under three hypotheses: H1 – JS positively correlates with QoL; H2 – JS negatively correlates with absenteeism; H3 – QoL negatively correlates with absenteeism.

By focusing on the overlooked roles of OAs, this research contributes to fostering more equitable school governance and the long-term retention of support staff. Given the recent emphasis on psychosocial risks in educational work, especially among support staff, this study offers practical

insights into how improving institutional climate and support could enhance well-being and attendance [16].

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: The next section presents the theoretical framework, reviewing the literature on job satisfaction, quality of work life, and absenteeism. The subsequent section outlines the methodological approach, detailing the instruments used, data collection procedures, and sample characteristics. The results section then presents the key findings of the study, followed by a discussion that interprets these results in light of the existing literature. Finally, the paper concludes by summarizing the main insights, highlighting practical implications for school administration, and suggesting directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Job Satisfaction (JS)

JS is a complex concept that reflects an employee's emotional and cognitive state regarding their work [17], encompassing feelings about various aspects of the job, such as the work environment, relationships with colleagues, and career opportunities [17,18]. In schools, JS is particularly significant as it directly impacts organizational success by influencing employee motivation, productivity, and overall performance [19,20]. Shrestha and Bhattarai [6] found that in educational settings, JS acts as a precursor to OCB, helping cultivate positive working habits, increased commitment, and institutional effectiveness. Understanding and measuring JS is essential for addressing employee-related challenges and fostering a stable and effective workforce [19]. This perspective is reinforced by evidence that JS operates alongside work-related stressors such as overload, ambiguity, and conflict, shaping both employee well-being and behavioral outcomes, including absenteeism [3].

JS is critical to the stability and effectiveness of schools, extending beyond teachers to include non-teaching staff, such as OAs, who are integral to daily operations. Research highlights that higher JS among school staff is associated with improved OCB, better school performance, and enhanced student outcomes [21,22]. Key factors influencing JS include opportunities for self-fulfillment, manageable workloads, fair compensation, leadership quality, and collegial relationships [23,24]. For non-teaching staff, elements such as remuneration, communication, supportive work environments, and access to training opportunities play pivotal roles [8].

A positive school climate also fosters JS, correlating with reduced absenteeism and increased satisfaction among staff and students [25,26]. Leadership support, career development opportunities, and favorable working conditions significantly influence JS and contribute to overall school effectiveness [7,27]. Higher levels of JS are linked to greater organizational commitment and reduced turnover intentions, underscoring its importance in retaining engaged and motivated staff [28,29].

Conversely, low JS among non-teaching staff, including OAs, is often associated with occupational stress, absenteeism, and long-term health issues, such as musculoskeletal problems [16,30]. Addressing these challenges requires attention to factors such as interpersonal relationships, professional development, welfare benefits, and stress management [31–33]. By improving JS, schools can create a more supportive work environment, ensuring the well-being of all staff and enhancing overall educational outcomes.

2.2. Quality of Work Life (QoWL)

QoWL is a multidimensional concept that encapsulates the physical, psychological, and social aspects of the workplace, which collectively shape employees' well-being and satisfaction. It reflects how effectively the work environment meets employees' needs, supports personal growth, and enhances their capacity to contribute to organizational goals [34]. In the school context, particularly for non-teaching staff such as OAs, QoWL plays a pivotal role in fostering motivation, efficiency, and the smooth operation of daily activities. Empirical evidence indicates that quality of work environments, including the management of stressors and the promotion of meaningful and

satisfying work, plays a central role in shaping employee well-being and reducing negative outcomes such as absenteeism [3,4]. Although job stress was not found to mediate the relationship between spirituality and happiness, compassion – one of the dimensions of spiritual work environments – played a key role in alleviating stress. These findings support the inclusion of emotional and relational dimensions in the discussion of QoWL, particularly among non-teaching staff.

For OAs, QoWL is influenced by several key factors, including the adequacy of resources, safe and clean working conditions, fair workload distribution, and access to professional development opportunities [10]. Interpersonal relationships with colleagues and school administrators further enhance QoWL, fostering a sense of belonging and collaboration [11,35]. Recognition of contributions and job security, particularly in public-sector roles, also contribute significantly to employees' overall satisfaction and stability [36].

The consequences of QoWL in the school setting are profound. High QoWL levels among OAs are associated with increased job satisfaction, reduced absenteeism, and greater organizational commitment, all of which contribute to the efficient functioning of schools [37]. Conversely, poor QoWL can lead to elevated stress, burnout, and increased turnover intentions, disrupting school operations and imposing additional strain on the remaining staff [16,38]. Furthermore, inadequate QoWL negatively affects employees' physical and mental health, compounding absenteeism and diminishing their capacity to perform effectively [39].

Addressing QoWL for non-teaching staff is a strategic priority for educational leaders and policymakers. Enhancing QoWL requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving workplace conditions, fostering positive relationships, providing career growth opportunities, and ensuring fair compensation and recognition [40,41]. Such approaches are supported by research demonstrating that improving organizational conditions, reducing stressors, and fostering meaningful work contribute to higher JS and lower absenteeism [3,4]. Supporting this view, Machado et al. [9] found that in organizational contexts, the intersection between motivation and happiness is deeply influenced by organizational climate and working conditions - both central to QoWL - reinforcing the value of investing in supportive and inclusive environments. Regular assessment of employee needs and periodic reviews of QoWL programs can further strengthen staff well-being and organizational efficiency [36,42]. By prioritizing QoWL, schools can create a resilient and inclusive work environment, ultimately benefiting not only the staff but also the broader school community, contributing to better student outcomes and a positive organizational culture [43,44].

Research consistently demonstrates a positive correlation between job satisfaction and quality of life among various professional groups. Multiple studies involving nurses [46,47], general employees [14], medical staff [47], occupational therapists [13], and audiologists [48] have found significant positive relationships between these two variables. Factors influencing job satisfaction and quality of life include age, economic level, marital status, work experience, and position [45,47]. Improving work-related quality of life can lead to increased job satisfaction [13], while enhancing job satisfaction may result in better overall quality of life [14]. However, a study on autistic workers found no significant changes in job satisfaction or quality of life over a 12-month period in a supported employment program [49], suggesting that the relationship may vary across different populations or work environments.

H1 - Job Satisfaction is positively correlated with Quality of Life in AOs

2.3. Absenteeism

Absenteeism in schools presents significant challenges, impacting both staff productivity and student outcomes. Among school employees, health-related issues such as obesity, depression, and smoking are major contributors to absenteeism and reduced work performance [50]. For teachers, illness-related absences disrupt student learning and school organization, highlighting the critical need for effective absenteeism management strategies [51]. Interventions such as training programs, incentive systems, and optimized work schedules have proven effective in mitigating absenteeism [52]. Additionally, implementing comprehensive safety and health management initiatives in schools

has been shown to enhance academic performance and reduce staff absences [53]. Addressing comorbidities and improving medication adherence are also key measures for reducing absenteeism and improving job performance [54]. Furthermore, school-based health services can play a pivotal role in mitigating health barriers and reducing student absenteeism, contributing to a more efficient educational environment [55]. A holistic approach that incorporates preventive measures, health risk management, and strategic workforce interventions is essential for addressing absenteeism in educational settings [56].

In non-teaching staff, absenteeism is influenced by a range of organizational and personal factors. Studies examining the relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism in educational settings have yielded mixed results. Some research reports a significant negative correlation between job satisfaction and absenteeism among teachers [57], while others find no significant relationship [58]. Work interdependence, workload, and work pressure have been identified as key drivers of absenteeism in educational staff [58,59]. For non-academic staff, job satisfaction dimensions such as promotion opportunities and effective communication are particularly important in mitigating absenteeism [60]. Meta-analyses further suggest that factors such as age, tenure, and data collection methods may moderate the relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism [61]. While job satisfaction can influence absenteeism, its effects are shaped by a complex interplay of individual and organizational dynamics [62].

Research suggests a significant negative correlation between job satisfaction and absenteeism, though this relationship can be influenced by various factors. Multiple studies have identified that higher job satisfaction is associated with lower absenteeism rates [63]. However, other findings highlight that the correlation may vary depending on individual and organizational moderators, such as guilt proneness [64], work interdependence [59], and social context [65].

Meta-analyses reveal that specific facets of job satisfaction, such as satisfaction with promotions, can exhibit stronger correlations with absenteeism [61,66]. Moreover, absence frequency—rather than the total number of days lost—is considered a more accurate measure of voluntary absenteeism [61].

In educational settings, where work interdependence plays a pivotal role, job satisfaction may be particularly crucial in mitigating absenteeism among support staff such as Operational Assistants. While the relationship is nuanced, evidence indicates that improving job satisfaction could serve as an effective strategy to reduce absenteeism, enhancing both staff well-being and school operations. Thus, we propose that:

H2 - Job Satisfaction is negatively correlated with Absenteeism in AOs

Research indicates a strong inverse relationship between Quality of Life (QoL) and absenteeism across various workforce sectors. Higher QoL is consistently associated with lower absenteeism rates, as individuals with better overall well-being are more engaged and productive at work [15,67]. Organizational factors such as social support, transformational leadership, and workplace satisfaction further enhance QoL and contribute to reduced absenteeism [68,69]. In public healthcare settings, where workload and stress levels are high, QoL improvements have been shown to mitigate absenteeism [70]. This research leads us to the following hypothesis:

H3 - Quality of Life is negatively correlated with Absenteeism in AOs

3. Materials and Methods

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29). Descriptive statistics were computed to characterize the sample. Spearman's rho was used to test correlations between the main variables due to the non-parametric nature of the data. In addition, exploratory analyses examined the relationships between absenteeism and variables such as age, education level, and commuting time. Significance was set at $p < .05$.

The survey instrument comprised three main sections: (1) sociodemographic and occupational information, (2) job satisfaction, and (3) quality of life.

Job Satisfaction was measured using the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) – Short Form, developed by Weiss et al. [71] and adapted to Portuguese by Martins e Proença [72]. The scale

includes 20 items rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 ("Very dissatisfied") to 5 ("Very satisfied"). It assesses both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of job satisfaction. In this study, the MSQ demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .887.

Quality of Life (QoL) was assessed using the WHOQOL-BREF, developed by the World Health Organization Quality of Life Group [73]. This 26-item instrument covers four domains: physical health, psychological well-being, social relationships, and environmental factors [74]. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating better perceived quality of life. In the current sample, the WHOQOL-BREF showed excellent reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .924).

Absenteeism was measured via a single-item indicator asking participants to report the number of sick leave days taken in the past 12 months.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The survey was open between June 15 and July 10, 2024. School directors were contacted via institutional email and invited to disseminate the survey to OAs in their respective schools. Additionally, the survey link was shared on relevant professional and social media platforms to improve participation.

A total of 398 OAs were invited to participate, and 119 fully completed the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 29.89%.

Participants were informed of the study's purpose and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. The online format facilitated easy access to the questionnaire, which was distributed via email to school directors and shared within professional networks on social media platforms.

Demographic analysis revealed that the sample was predominantly female (90%), with the majority of participants aged between 40 and 60 years – 34% were in the 50–60 age group and 30% in the 40–50 range. Most respondents (61%) had over 10 years of professional experience, indicating a highly experienced support workforce. Regarding employment status, 59% of participants held permanent public-sector contracts. In terms of educational attainment, secondary education was the highest level completed by approximately half of the sample.

Participants were drawn from ten educational institutions within the municipality. Nearly half of the responses came from three of the largest schools: Agrupamento de Escolas Sebastião da Gama, Agrupamento de Escolas Barbosa du Bocage, and Escola Secundária D. Manuel Martins, reflecting their higher staffing levels. Approximately 25% of respondents were employed at Agrupamento de Escolas de Azeitão and Agrupamento de Escolas Ordem de Sant'Iago. The remaining responses were distributed among other schools, with Escola Secundária du Bocage showing the lowest participation, accounting for only 5.9% of the sample. While participation varied across institutions, the overall sample provides a broad representation of OAs within Setúbal's public education system.

The Materials and Methods should be described with sufficient details to allow others to replicate and build on the published results. Please note that the publication of your manuscript implicates that you must make all materials, data, computer code, and protocols associated with the publication available to readers. Please disclose at the submission stage any restrictions on the availability of materials or information. New methods and protocols should be described in detail while well-established methods can be briefly described and appropriately cited.

3. Results and Discussion

The main findings of this study confirmed a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between job satisfaction and quality of life among OAs. Spearman's correlation coefficient was $\rho = 0.848$, $p < .001$, indicating that higher levels of job satisfaction were associated with enhanced perceptions of well-being across psychological and social dimensions. These results support Hypothesis 1 (H1) and align with the broader literature that highlights the reciprocal reinforcement between satisfaction at work and overall life quality.

The analysis also explored the relationship between job satisfaction and absenteeism. Results revealed a negative but non-significant correlation between the two variables ($\rho = -0.147$, $p = .112$). While the direction of the relationship is consistent with Hypothesis 2 (H2) – suggesting that

increased job satisfaction may be associated with fewer absences – the lack of statistical significance indicates that this association should be interpreted with caution. Nevertheless, the trend underscores the potential for job satisfaction to influence attendance patterns among school support staff.

Supporting Hypothesis 3 (H3), the results showed a statistically significant negative correlation between quality of life and absenteeism ($\rho = -0.215$, $p = .019$). This finding indicates that OAs with higher reported quality of life tend to have lower absenteeism rates, reinforcing the protective role of well-being in preventing work-related absences. It thus highlights the importance of promoting workplace conditions that contribute to physical and psychological health as a strategy to mitigate absenteeism.

Table 1 summarizes the correlation coefficients among the core variables present in this study's hypotheses.

Table 1. Correlations Between Job Satisfaction, Quality of Life, and Absenteeism.

Variable Pair	Spearman's ρ	p-value
H1: Job Satisfaction and Quality of Life	0.848**	< 0.001
H2: Job Satisfaction and Absenteeism	-0.147	0.112
H3: Quality of Life and Absenteeism	-0.215*	0.019

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Beyond the primary correlations supporting the hypotheses, further statistical analyses revealed additional insights into the factors influencing job satisfaction, quality of life, and absenteeism among OAs in public schools.

Firstly, no significant correlation was found between age and job satisfaction ($\rho = -0.057$, $p = 0.537$), nor between age and quality of life ($\rho = -0.044$, $p = 0.631$). These results are consistent with existing literature, which presents mixed findings regarding the relationship between age and job satisfaction, suggesting that age alone may not be a decisive factor in workplace contentment. Similarly, there was no statistically significant correlation between age and the number of sick leave days taken in the past year ($\rho = -0.121$, $p = 0.189$), contradicting the expectation that older employees – who are typically more susceptible to chronic health conditions – would exhibit higher absenteeism rates. Notably, 77% of respondents reported taking two or fewer sick leave days over the last 12 months, indicating relatively low illness-related absenteeism across the sample.

A statistically significant negative correlation was found between age and education level ($\rho = -0.281$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that younger employees tend to have higher academic qualifications. This may reflect broader societal trends in access to education and generational shifts in formal schooling. However, despite this difference in educational attainment, no significant correlation was established between education level and job satisfaction ($\rho = -0.002$, $p = 0.982$), nor between education level and quality of life ($\rho = -0.002$, $p = 0.982$), indicating that higher qualifications do not necessarily translate into greater satisfaction or perceived quality of life among OAs. Given this absence of association with key attitudinal variables, it is reasonable to infer that education level is unlikely to be a major predictor of absenteeism within this population.

Regarding commuting time, results indicated no significant correlation between the number of minutes spent traveling to work and job satisfaction ($\rho = -0.160$, $p = 0.083$), or between commuting time and quality of life ($\rho = -0.115$, $p = 0.211$). These findings suggest that commuting time, within this sample, does not constitute a major determinant of either job satisfaction or well-being. This could be attributed to existing mechanisms that allow staff to request transfers to schools closer to their place of residence, thereby mitigating potential work–life imbalances. Consequently, it is also

plausible to deduce that commuting time does not exert a significant influence on absenteeism rates, particularly given its negligible association with job satisfaction and quality of life.

Collectively, these findings enhance our understanding of the complex interplay between job satisfaction, quality of life, and absenteeism among OAs. While job satisfaction and quality of life play clear and central roles in shaping absenteeism patterns, sociodemographic variables such as age, education level, and commute time appear to have limited impact. These deductions suggest that institutional and psychosocial factors may be more relevant targets for intervention than personal background characteristics in efforts to reduce absenteeism. These insights point to the importance of organizational strategies focused on workplace conditions, rather than solely on individual characteristics, to reduce absenteeism and foster a more resilient workforce.

Finally, according to the 2022 Social Balance Sheet of the Municipality of Setúbal [75], categories of absenteeism include health-related, family-related, and other reasons (Figure 1). These data highlight the dominant role of health-related factors among OAs in public schools, reinforcing the importance of institutional strategies to address psychosocial risk factors and promote gender-sensitive workforce policies.

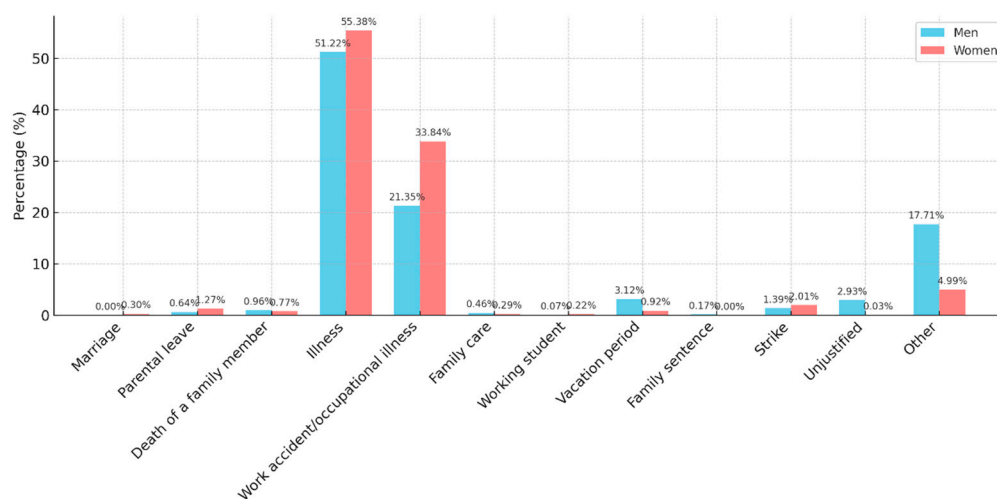


Figure 1. Gender Distribution of Absenteeism Causes Among Operational Assistants (OAs) in Public Schools (%).

As illustrated in Figure 1, official municipality records reveal significant gender-based differences in the reasons for absenteeism among OAs in public schools. Female staff members accounted for 63.2% of all recorded absences, with particularly high representation in health-related categories. Among female OAs, the most prominent causes were illness (55.38%) and work accidents or occupational illness (33.8%), which together accounted for nearly 90% of their absences. In contrast, male OAs also listed illness (51.22%) as the leading cause, but a substantial share was due to “other” reasons (17.71%) and work-related accidents (21.35%). These statistics reinforce the gendered dynamics of absenteeism, highlighting how health issues disproportionately affect female OAs, suggesting compounded vulnerabilities in their work conditions and thus aligning with broader evidence suggesting that women face compounded challenges in balancing professional and domestic responsibilities.

Taking stock, this study offers meaningful contributions to understanding the working conditions and well-being of OAs in public schools – an essential yet often overlooked segment of educational personnel [76]. By examining the relationships among JS, QoWL, and absenteeism, this research sheds light on key organizational dynamics that influence staff engagement, well-being, and school effectiveness.

The findings confirm a strong and statistically significant positive correlation between JS and QoWL ($\rho = 0.848$, $p < .001$), reinforcing prior evidence that employees who are more satisfied with

their jobs also report higher levels of psychological, social, and environmental well-being [13,14,45,46]. This aligns with broader research across healthcare and education, which suggests that job satisfaction and quality of life are mutually reinforcing and critical to retention, motivation, and performance [19,21].

Contrary to expectations, the correlation between JS and absenteeism was negative but not statistically significant ($\rho = -0.147$, $p = .112$). While this diverges from earlier findings by Ejere [57], it underscores the complexity of absenteeism as a multifactorial behavior. As previous literature suggests, variables such as job interdependence, workload, task demands, and family responsibilities may act as moderators, obscuring a direct satisfaction-absence link [59,64].

Notably, QoWL was significantly and negatively correlated with absenteeism ($\rho = -0.215$, $p = .019$), supporting the hypothesis that enhanced well-being functions as a protective factor against health-related absences [15,68]. This finding confirms that fostering QoWL through supportive work environments, manageable workloads, and strong interpersonal relationships is not only essential for morale but also for operational continuity in schools [37,53].

Additional analyses explored the role of sociodemographic factors. Age was not significantly correlated with either JS ($\rho = -0.057$, $p = 0.537$) or QoWL ($\rho = -0.044$, $p = 0.631$), aligning with prior research that suggests job attitudes may remain stable over time when work roles are consistent [47]. Interestingly, younger employees had higher levels of education (ρ between age and education = -0.281 , $p = 0.002$), reflecting generational shifts in access to formal schooling. However, education level was not significantly associated with either JS or QoWL, possibly indicating that in operational roles like those of OAs, formal qualifications are not closely tied to perceived job adequacy or fulfillment [30].

Commuting time also showed no significant relationship with either JS ($\rho = -0.160$, $p = 0.083$) or QoWL ($\rho = -0.115$, $p = 0.211$). These findings may be explained by job localization mechanisms within the district, which enable OAs to request school transfers closer to their homes, thereby minimizing commuting stress and preserving work-life balance.

A gendered lens revealed additional layers of absenteeism dynamics. According to municipal records [75], women accounted for 55.4% of health-related absences, rising to 89.22% when occupational illness is included. These figures highlight the disproportionate impact of occupational and domestic responsibilities on female employees, reflecting broader gendered patterns in workplace stress and absenteeism [32].

Overall, the results emphasize that while absenteeism is influenced by personal and contextual variables, improving QoWL and JS – particularly through supportive leadership, fair workloads, and opportunities for professional growth – can play a critical role in mitigating staff absences. These findings point to an urgent need for school leaders and policymakers to extend human resource strategies beyond teachers, recognizing OAs as vital contributors to school success. Tailored interventions that enhance well-being and value non-teaching staff may yield substantial benefits for school performance, workforce sustainability, and organizational climate.

5. Conclusions

OAs are fundamental to the smooth functioning of public schools, ensuring that daily operations run seamlessly and providing a safe environment for students and staff. Despite their crucial role, this workforce often operates under challenging conditions, with limited recognition of their well-being and work-life quality. Their role remains largely invisible in educational policy and research, despite being essential to school resilience and continuity. Absenteeism among OAs due to health issues poses significant challenges for school administration, disrupting operations and highlighting the need for targeted workforce management strategies. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among female OAs, who account for the majority of health-related absences, reflecting the gendered burden of reconciling professional responsibilities with caregiving roles.

To address this gap, the present study investigated the interplay between QoWL, JS, and absenteeism among OAs in public schools within the Municipality of Setúbal, Portugal. Using a

quantitative survey approach with 119 participants, we explored how these factors influence absenteeism, with a focus on identifying actionable insights to improve workplace conditions and support systems.

Our findings confirm that QoWL is strongly and positively correlated with JS and significantly negatively associated with absenteeism, particularly in relation to health-related absences. This reinforces the idea that QoWL not only shapes employees' subjective experiences at work but also plays a protective role in preventing work disruptions. These results suggest that improved working conditions and psychosocial support structures are vital for promoting employee well-being and minimizing disruptions to school operations. Although JS was not significantly associated with absenteeism, its strong correlation with QoWL reinforces the idea that enhancing workplace satisfaction may indirectly contribute to reducing absenteeism and fostering a healthier work environment.

The results underscore the necessity for targeted strategies to improve QoWL among OAs, such as enhanced health and safety measures, mental health support, and workplace training programs. Such interventions should prioritize both organizational and relational dimensions of work, recognizing the influence of interpersonal climate, leadership quality, and perceived institutional support. By addressing these areas, school administrators and policymakers can create more equitable and sustainable working environments, ultimately contributing to reduced absenteeism and increased workforce stability.

This study highlights the critical role of QoWL in mitigating health-related absenteeism among OAs, with a clear interconnection between QoWL and JS. Addressing these factors is essential for fostering a resilient and effective school workforce.

By shedding light on the often-overlooked experiences of OAs, this research contributes to the broader discourse on workforce management in education, offering actionable recommendations for enhancing school administration practices and promoting the well-being of essential staff members. In doing so, it affirms the strategic importance of valuing all school personnel – not only to support individual well-being, but to strengthen the collective functioning of public education systems.

Despite its contributions, this study presents limitations that warrant consideration. First, the sample was geographically restricted to the Municipality of Setúbal, Portugal, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other national or international educational contexts with different organizational cultures, policies, or workforce characteristics. The reliance on a voluntary, non-probabilistic sample introduces the possibility of self-selection bias, as individuals with stronger perceptions about their work conditions may have been more motivated to respond. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported measures – including absenteeism – which may be susceptible to recall inaccuracies or social desirability effects, thereby affecting data reliability.

Future research should seek to overcome these limitations through more robust and diversified methodologies. Longitudinal designs could be employed to capture causal and temporal dynamics between job satisfaction, quality of work life, and absenteeism. Expanding the research to include a broader and more heterogeneous school settings – across municipalities, educational levels, or employment arrangements – would enhance the external validity of results. Comparative studies between teaching and non-teaching staff, or across different school systems (e.g., urban vs. rural, public vs. private), could yield deeper insights into patterns of occupational well-being within educational contexts. Moreover, integrating qualitative approaches would enrich understanding of how OAs experience their roles, constraints, and sources of stress and satisfaction, helping to contextualize quantitative trends. Such mixed-methods designs could also illuminate the influence of gender, age, or seniority on job satisfaction and absenteeism, thereby offering more tailored recommendations for workforce management in schools.

Translating these findings into practice offers valuable insights for improving school operations and staff well-being. The results of this study underscore the urgent need for school administrators and policymakers to develop and implement targeted strategies aimed at enhancing the QoWL for OAs. Given the significant negative correlation identified between QoWL and absenteeism,

improving workplace conditions is not only a matter of fairness, but also of operational necessity. Concrete measures – such as ensuring adequate staffing, reducing task overload, and fostering a psychologically safe and inclusive organizational climate – can contribute to lower absenteeism and enhanced workforce resilience. Schools should also consider providing tailored resources that address the specific demands of OAs' roles, including ergonomic adjustments, regular access to mental health services, and professional development opportunities.

Particular attention should be given to strengthening recognition and participation mechanisms, which contribute to greater job satisfaction and, indirectly, to improved attendance and well-being. This includes transparent communication, involvement in school-level decision-making, and access to structured career pathways. The strong association between job satisfaction and QoWL suggests that promoting one dimension can positively influence the other, leading to broader organizational benefits such as increased engagement, motivation, and retention.

School leaders are encouraged to integrate OAs more fully into human resources planning, ensuring they are included in regular performance appraisals, professional goal setting, and continuous training. Institutionalizing these practices can help reposition OAs from peripheral roles to integral contributors within the school ecosystem.

Finally, workforce management strategies must address the gendered patterns of absenteeism identified in this study. Female OAs, who constitute the majority of the workforce and are disproportionately affected by health-related leave, may face additional pressures in balancing professional and domestic responsibilities. Promoting gender-sensitive policies – including flexible scheduling, support for family care responsibilities, and equitable access to career development – is essential to ensure fairness and sustainability.

By adopting inclusive, health-oriented, and participatory practices, school systems can not only improve working conditions for OAs, but also strengthen organizational cohesion, reduce disruption, and ultimately support the delivery of high-quality education.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

MDPI	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute
DOAJ	Directory of open access journals
TLA	Three letter acronym

LD Linear dichroism

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