Question 2

Theoretical Foundations of Intervention

Mark is a 42-year-old, married African American man currently experiencing a crisis in his professional and personal life that has led him to seek the pastoral counseling services of the minister at his church. Use the information below about him, his personal and family history and his current situation to discuss the questions that follow.

The Work Setting and Mark's History Within It

Mark works as a middle school teacher in an inner city school in a large Texas city. He has only been teaching for a few years, having made a midlife career change. He has a Ph.D. in Computer Science, and previously had worked at a high-level management position in a telecommunications firm. Downsized from this company, he and several friends founded a start-up internet company. When the company went bankrupt in the bursting of the internet bubble, Mark went through a period of soul-searching and decided on a teaching career.

He had created a niche for himself in the high school, a special magnet technology school, setting up and running a computer and technology lab. This was a source of great pride and a sense of accomplishment. He was held in very high esteem in his school, both for his educational and business background, and for the quality of his program.

Then Katrina hit, just into a school year that had been going very well for Mark: “the first year I started the lab with everything perfectly in place and just the way I wanted it” Mark's district was one that opened itself to students displaced in the wake of the disaster, and a large shelter opened up in his district. Families flooded in; a steady stream of new students enrolled; classes quickly became overcrowded, and the district had to make adjustments to deal with the influx. The superintendent decided that a number of sacrifices were necessary, and that the program Mark had been running was an “extra,” a luxury that in the current crisis could not be afforded. To make matters worse, the district exercised its option to move teachers around to areas of greatest need. The middle school, already suffering from teacher turnover and shortages, desperately needed a math teacher. Mark had the necessary certifications, was the most recent addition at the high school, and found himself from one week to the next summarily moved from a teaching job that he loved to one in the middle school that he found “a combination of boring and frightening.”
The Individual

Mark is the oldest son of a military family. He has a brother 3 years younger and a sister 6 years younger than he is. His father was from a large, African American family in the South, grew up with a lot of financial instability and felt that the military was his ticket out. He became a career military man, retiring as a Master Sergeant, spending most of his career in training roles. “He's proud of me, I know, but has never said so. He's not really a guy you can talk to.”

Mark's mother had extreme mood swings and “you never knew which mother you were going to get. When she was on her medication, she could be great, but when she was not, it was a nightmare. She would pick at everything, go into explosive rages. I remember hiding behind the couch once when I was alone in the house with her, literally afraid she was going to kill me.” His father dealt with this stoically, handling each crisis, but never talking about it with the children. His father was also out of the house a lot, leaving Mark to do his best to protect and soothe the younger kids when his mother was in a bad state. In and out of hospitals, his mother committed suicide when Mark was 12. “Crazy as she was, I was the kid who was closest to her. I felt this weird combination of grief and relief.”

Because of his father's military career, the family moved every few years during Mark's growing up, and he felt these disruptions keenly. “I would just get settled in a school, and it was time to move again.” He was often the target of bullies in the new schools, particularly schools where there were racial tensions, something he never confided in his family. “I always felt alone with my troubles. I think I decided early on that no one was going to help me. I tried to make a virtue of being self-reliant.” Just as his father had seen the military as a path to a better life, he saw education as his path. “When I found how good I was with computers, I buried myself in that. It was a world that made sense.”

Mark married Alice when he was 28 and she was 23. They met at an African American Student Association meeting when he was in graduate school and she was an undergraduate. He had always been shy about pursuing women romantically, had dated little. She pursued him, and surprised to find that someone found him attractive, he responded. “I'd decided that probably I'd just never marry, and then here was this person who wanted to be with me.” After some struggles with infertility and a difficult pregnancy, they had twin girls, now 7. The marriage has been mostly stable, with some painful disagreements over “communication styles.” “Alice wants me to tell her what's bothering me, and it's not like I don't want to, sometimes I just can't.”

“I've always had an anxious temperament, though I've learned to look calmer on the outside than I feel on the inside.” “When I got downsized, I thought I'd have more control if I started my own company, but was I ever wrong about that.” He had always seen teaching as stable and predictable. “I knew there was some anxiety until you got tenure, but then it seemed like the job would always be something solid you could count on.” He had felt that his new life was finally coming together, when this situation “snatched it away” from him.
The Current Situation

Mark was desperately unhappy in his new job, even before the incident described below. “If there's one thing I never wanted to be, it's a middle school teacher. And this is the worst possible scenario.” Teachers feel overwhelmed by the problems of the new students and their difficulties assimilating Fights in the schools has increased several times over, and Mark has witnessed more than a dozen fights between New Orleans and local students, at least three of them melees. “We were a melting pot school, mostly Latinos and African Americans, with a pretty fragile balance and a lot of turf lines. The newcomers have particularly threatened the African American kids, and somehow, as an African American male, I think other teachers think I can do something better in a crisis, but I have no idea how to help.”

The school itself was already under considerable strain. Most of its students are from poor families, and it had failed last year to make the federal standards in math and language arts in the “No Child Left Behind” Program. Consequently, the school remains under significant pressure to get its scores up, despite the influx of new and even less prepared students. Teachers believe they must teach to the test, and their freedom to structure their lessons themselves or try different and more creative strategies is severely limited. “I made this career switch because I thought I had something special to offer. This system treats me like I'm a replaceable cog in the machine. It is as if the white administration has no concept of me as a competent highly qualified professional but rather consciously or unconsciously thinks, ‘Here's a black man; he is dispensable with no loss (and maybe even a net gain). Perhaps they cannot tolerate a black man who developed a highly successful program in the high school.’ Thus, they can move me whenever they want to wherever it suits their needs.”

In talking with the guidance counselor, also a friend, Mark learned that a serious conflict among senior administrators in the district was unfolding. On one side were those who believed that concern for the children from Katrina whom they were helping should receive equal, but no greater weight, than maintaining the excellence of their own programs. Others in the administration, who were more “political”, emphasized the favorable public relations that would accrue to the district, if they got good press for their efforts to help the Katrina victims. Those who were more attentive to local questions of excellence cautioned that, if the school undermined its own professionalism, they would lose more than a good public image. Meanwhile, the American Federations of Teachers Union took the position that the most important value to honor was seniority (unspoken, regardless of the consequences for other values). On hearing about these debates, Mark realized that the concerns he felt were not his alone but reflected fundamental questions about what directions the senior leaders (both administrative and union) were to take the district in this time of tension and crisis. Beyond questions of how Mark's district employed his discipline-based skills, moreover, was the heightening racial tension in the school—not just among the students but also among faculty. While walking in the hallway one day, Mark overheard two white female teachers say, “They are his [meaning Mark's] people for heaven's sake, why can't he control them?” This was the first time, in his brief time as a teacher, that Mark had experienced comments of this kind.
A recent incident greatly deepened the crisis for Mark. A white female teacher with whom he was friendly screamed to him for help from another room. He rushed in to find two students fighting each other. He and the other teacher, along with another student, successfully broke up the fight, but then one of the boys involved tried to run from the room. Mark stood in the doorway, blocking him, and the student violently shoved him, causing him to fall backwards and hit his head. “That was ten days ago, and I haven't been back yet. I honestly don't know if I want to go back. Why should I continue to expose myself to the racism so deeply entrenched in the system?” There's actually something called Assault Leave, for teachers to whom this has happened, but I've used it up and they are beginning to pressure me to return.”

Mark has been increasingly angry, anxious, and depressed. He keeps reviewing the events in his mind. “I keep going over and over it in my head, how stupid I was. Everyone knows you don't get between an out of control, violent person and his escape route. What was I thinking? How come some of the white people present did not help me? I could have been killed, and they did nothing.” He also wonders about whether he made a mistake in choosing this career and what to do with his life. His sleep has been disrupted; he awakens several times a night and can't get back to sleep because of these worries.

“I don't know what to do. Sometimes I think my efforts over the years have been useless. No matter how hard you work, how much you think you can make a dream come true, it can all be taken away in a moment. Racism continues in deep and profound ways, despite the so-called progress white people think we have made. Too often, I tend to withdraw into myself. Are there white people I might count on? I just do not know. Alice tries to talk to me, but I keep pulling away.”

Questions

1. Separately develop a case formulation of the individual challenges facing Mark (a) from a psychodynamic perspective, and (b) from cognitive-behavioral perspective.

   A. Compare and contrast the two formulations for similarities and differences.

   B. Discuss what additional kinds of information each of the two perspectives might lead you to seek.

2. Drawing on group and organization theory, explain what was happening to the district as a system (and thereby to Mark). Be sure to take account of the systemic racism, the racial dynamics of the district, the lack of racial consciousness of Mark's immediate colleagues, and Mark's race and gender.

3. Discuss ways in which the individual-level analysis in Question 1 and the group/organizational analysis in Question 2 (a) complement each other, and (b) contrast with one another.