



ROLE MODELS AND STEREOTYPES: MISTY COPELAND'S STORY

Misty Copeland is a thirty-three year old ballerina who recently became the first African American performer to be appointed as a Principal Dancer for the American Ballet Theater in its 75 year history. Copeland joined the studio company of American Ballet Theatre (ABT) in 2000, becoming a soloist several years later and starring in a range of productions such as *The Nutcracker* and *Firebird*. The ballerina has written two autobiographical books; one for adults called *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*, a *New York Times* best-selling memoir, and the award-winning children's picture book *Firebird*. In April 2015, Copeland was named one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World" by *Time* magazine and a new documentary film about her life called *A Ballerina's Tale* was released in October 2015. Copeland has talked publicly about the harmful influence of the stereotypes about being a ballerina and also how being the first African American Principal Dancer makes her an important role model for children of color.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn about Misty Copeland, reflect on her experiences and story and explore how stereotypes and role models influence career aspirations and decisions.

See these additional ADL resources: *Current Events Classroom* lessons "[Mo'Ne Davis and Gender Stereotypes](#)" and "[Who Am I? Identity Poems](#)," [10 Ideas for Teaching Black History Month](#), and [How Can I Avoid Sending Biased Messages?](#)

Grade Level: grades 2–5

Time: 45 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Speaking and Listening

Learning Objectives:

- Students will learn about Misty Copeland, her story and her reflections about being the first African American Principal Dancer.
- Students will reflect on their own career aspirations and how they came up with those ideas.
- Students will identify the ways in which role models and stereotypes influence what young people want to be when they grow up.

Compelling Question: What are the impacts of stereotypes and/or role models on what children identify as their career aspirations?

Material:

- [Match People and Careers](#) (one for each student)
- *A Ballerina's Tale - Official Trailer* video (2 mins., IFC Films, www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Y2h6fz2XzQ)
- "Dance company names 1st African-American principal ballerina" (Newsela, November 13, 2015, <https://newsela.com/articles/copeland-balletfame/id/12605/>, one copy for each student)
- Misty's Gallery Images, <http://mistycopeland.com/images/>

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "[Glossary of Education Terms](#).")

- ballet
- opportunities
- role model
- diversity
- passionate
- stereotype
- healthy
- principal dancer
- work ethic

WARM UP: MATCH PEOPLE AND CAREERS

Distribute one copy of [Match People and Careers](#) to each student. Explain to students that they should look at the six pictures of people on the left side and match the picture with the job/profession on the right side that they think that person currently has or held in the past. Instruct students to make the match based on the first thing that comes into their minds and not think about it too much. Give 2–5 minutes for students to complete the handout and then have them put it away for now.

For each of the job/profession titles, you may need to explain what those jobs are as follows:

- **Astrophysicist:** a scientist who works in the branch of physics concerned with the physical and chemical properties.
- **Ballet Dancer:** An artistic dancer who performs to music using precise and highly formalized set steps and gestures.
- **Boxer:** An athlete who plays a martial art and combat sport in which two people throw punches at each other, usually with gloved hands.
- **Football Player:** An athlete who plays the game of football, which is a game of two opposing teams, each defending goals on opposite sides of a field with goal posts at each end.
- **President:** The person who holds the office of head of state of the United States government.

INFORMATION SHARING: WHO IS MISTY COPELAND?

1. Tell students that Person F from their handout is Misty Copeland. Ask students: *Do you know who Misty Copeland is?* Explain that Misty Copeland is a ballet dancer with the American Ballet Theatre (ABT) and the first African American ballerina to become a "Principal Dancer" in the ABT's 75 year history. Explain that they will learn more about her during this lesson.
2. Show the video [A Ballerina's Tale - Official Trailer](#).

3. After watching the video, engage students in a discussion by asking:

- How did you feel while watching the video?
- What does Misty mean when she says “I didn’t fit the mold.”
- How is Misty Copeland a role model for others?
- What more do you want to know about Misty Copeland?

NOTE: If you want to go into more depth and have time, you can also show the *TIME* video *Misty Copeland on Changing the Face of Ballet* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddarrb8u7p8.

4. Share some or all of the additional information about Misty Copeland:

- Misty Copeland is a thirty-three year old ballerina who recently became the first African American performer to be appointed as a principal dancer for the American Ballet Theater in its 75 year history. Copeland joined the studio company of American Ballet Theatre in 2000, becoming a soloist several years later and starring in a range of productions such as *The Nutcracker* and *Firebird*.
- The ballerina has written two autobiographical books; one for adults called *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*, a *New York Times* best-selling memoir and the award-winning children’s picture book *Firebird*. In April, 2015, Copeland was named one of the “100 Most Influential People in the World” by *Time* magazine and a new documentary film about her life called *A Ballerina’s Tale* was released in October 2015.
- Copeland has talked publicly and extensively about the harmful influence of stereotypes of being a ballerina and also how being the first African American principal dancer makes her an important role model for children of color.

READING ACTIVITY

1. Distribute to each student a copy of the Newsela article “[Dance company names 1st African-American principal ballerina](#)” which is written at a fourth grade reading level. Give students ten minutes to read the article silently.

NOTE: If you require reading material with different reading levels, you can use [Newsela](#), a website that publishes high-interest news articles daily at five reading levels. Articles on Misty Copeland are available from Newsela at the 2nd, 4th, 5th, 7th and 12th grade levels. You have to register (free) to access the articles. Depending on the grade level you teach, you may need to adjust the discussion questions; the questions below are based on the fourth grade level article.

2. After students have read the article, engage them in a discussion by asking:

- Why is Misty Copeland famous?
- Why is she an “example” and a role model? Why does she say it is extra important because “I’m a black ballerina.”
- Why do you think Misty Copeland is excited to be a “Principal Dancer?”
- What are some words you would use to describe Misty Copeland?

PHOTO GALLERY WALK

1. Use the photos from [Misty Copeland's Website](#) to select 6–8 photos and either project the photos on the board/smart board or print them out and place them around the classroom mounted on a larger piece of paper or chart paper.
2. Give students 10 minutes to walk around the classroom, looking at each photo one at a time and responding to the following questions about each. Students can write their responses on the chart paper or if you are projecting the photos, have them write their thoughts on a piece of paper at their desks.
 - What's going on in this photo? Write a caption for the photo.
 - What do you think Misty is thinking and/or feeling?
 - If you could ask Misty a question, what would you ask her?
3. After students have completed the gallery walk and written their thoughts, engage them in a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What more did you learn about Misty Copeland by looking at these photographs?
 - What are some of the feelings you identified in the photos?
 - What else do you want to know about Misty? What would you ask her if you could?

DISCUSSION: ROLE MODELS AND STEREOTYPES

1. Ask students: *What job/profession are you interested in for the future? What do you want to be when you grow up?* This will be a brainstorming session where students may identify several professions with you recording them; you may visually group certain jobs together (e.g. football player and basketball player).
2. Have students turn and talk with the person sitting next to them and share their job/profession ideas. With their partner, students should also explain how they came up with those ideas. Ask: *Do you know anyone in that career or job you look up to? Do you see other people in that profession who are similar to you in some way (race, gender, religion, etc.)?*
3. When students are finished sharing, ask some students to share with the class what they discussed with their partners. Then ask: *What is a role model?* Explain that a role model is a person looked to by others as an example to be imitated. Ask: *How is Misty a role model? How were others a role model for Misty?*
4. Then ask students: *What is a stereotype?* Define **stereotype** as *the false idea that all members of a group are the same and think and behave in the same way*. Ask: *Can anyone give an example of stereotype?* Make the connection to Misty Copeland, that she thought all ballerinas were white and skinny.
5. Have students take out their [Match People and Careers](#) handout. As a class, go through the pictures one-by-one, having students share their answers and clarifying the correct answers sharing a brief explanation of who they are as follows:

A-Football Player: Jennifer Welter was a professional football player for 14 years in the women's football league. In the men's professional football league, she became the first female to play a non-kicking position in February 2014 and the first female coach in February 2015.

B-Presidential Candidate: Shirley Chisholm was the first African-American woman elected to Congress in 1968 and the first woman to run for President of the United States in 1972.

C–Astrophysicist: Neil deGrasse Tyson is the Director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York. He was appointed by President George W. Bush in 2001 to study and assess the future of the U.S. aerospace industry and its importance for the economic and national security of the United States. He was appointed again by Bush in 2004 to a commission for the implementation of the United States Space Exploration Policy.

D–Boxer: Mary Kom is the first Indian female boxer to get a Gold Medal in the Asian Games in 2014 in South Korea and the only woman boxer to have won a medal in each one of the six world championships.

E–President: Franklin Delano Roosevelt (commonly known as FDR) was the 32nd President of the United States who was diagnosed with Polio in 1921. This condition caused paralysis from the waist down but Roosevelt usually appeared in public standing upright, rarely being seen in a wheelchair.

F–Ballet Dancer: Misty Copeland

6. Then ask students: *How did you come up with your matches? What information did you use to decide what jobs/professions matched each person? Ask: Do you think stereotypes played a part in that decision? Why or why not?* Help students think about why people who are the targets of stereotypes may begin to believe them to be true, and how stereotypes may limit people’s opportunities if they believe them.

NOTE: Some students may feel reluctant to express stereotypes for fear that people will think they believe those stereotypes. Emphasize that the stereotypes students think about and share do not necessarily reflect their actual beliefs but they underscore how deeply ingrained stereotypical thinking is in all of us. If appropriate, assure students that they should share without fear of judgment.

7. Engage students in a general discussion about the impact of role models and stereotypes by asking: *How are stereotypes harmful? How are role models helpful? How have role models and stereotypes had an influence in your life?* Summarize the discussion by saying if you are a certain race, gender, religion, etc. and you don’t see people of race, gender, religion, etc. in certain professions, it’s difficult to think of yourself that way. Remind students that the United States has never had a woman President; ask them why they think that is the case. Similarly, if there are stereotypes about certain professions as in the example of Misty Copeland (i.e. most ballerinas are white women who are very skinny), that can limit people’s ideas, opportunities and dreams for themselves.

CLOSING

Do a go-round with students completing the sentence: I used to think _____ but now I _____.

ADDITIONAL READING

- [Firebird](#) by Misty Copeland (children’s book)
- [Life In Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina](#) by Misty Copeland
- [The Official Website of Misty Copeland](#)
- [Misty Copeland Biography](#) (Biography.com)
- [“Misty Copeland Is Promoted to Principal Dancer at American Ballet Theater”](#) (*The New York Times*, June 30, 2015)
- [Misty Copeland makes a point of dancing for unlikely fans](#) (Video: PBS News Hour)
- [“Misty Copeland on Love, Life and Leaps of Faith”](#) (*Elle*, May 29, 2014)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

| Content Area/Standard |
|---|
| Reading |
| Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. |
| Speaking and Listening |
| Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. |
| Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally. |

MATCH PEOPLE AND CAREERS

Instructions: Look at the six pictures on the left side and match the picture with the job/profession on the right side that you think that person currently has or held in the past. Write the letter of the corresponding photo next to the job/profession.



_____ Astrophysicist

_____ Ballet Dancer

_____ President

_____ Football Player

_____ Presidential Candidate

_____ Boxer