



Reading summary

Zembylas, M. (2024). Unlearning emotional imperialism in education: Political, theoretical and pedagogical implications. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 45(4), 569–582. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2024.2360091>

This article considers what it means pedagogically to unlearn emotional imperialism, drawing on affect theory and decolonial theory. Emotional imperialism involves imposing a culture's emotional norms and standards on a less powerful group, while marking the latter's norms and standards as inferior. It shapes which affective responses are prioritised, how emotions are managed and enacted, and which practices are conducted to express or elicit emotions. Unlearning imperialism requires more than new narratives and concepts; it requires undoing emotions, memories and thoughts that are conditioned by imperialism. After educators and students have unlearned emotional imperialism, they can proceed to decolonise the curriculum in other respects.

Unlearning is a continual process of breaking with previous modes of understanding, being and acting in the world. This process is onto-epistemological, affective and political.

Unlearning imperialism entails de-naturalising imperial actions, memories and objects, and legitimating and redistributing non-imperial actions, memories and potentialities. It is an intellectual and political commitment that requires attention to the affective logic of the operations of imperialism and how those logics are manifested in pedagogical practices.

In the classroom, unlearning emotional imperialism requires a deep commitment to interrogating manifestations of emotional imperialism in educational settings as well as a willingness to undo the emotional practices through which imperialism conditions us to act as its agents. This includes having the political will to expose emotional violence against marginalised students and educators, to acknowledge how it saturates our lives, and to recognise our own complicity with imperial violence and dehumanisation. This is not an

addition to the curriculum; rather a fundamental re-ontologisation of social and political life, including education, is required to move away from imperial ways of thinking, feeling and acting. This work will inevitably produce emotional ambivalence, mixed feelings and contradictions. Affective habits that have been formed through longstanding social and political formations are not going to change easily, and this work will require substantial time and space.

Take-home messages

Emotional imperialism reproduces violence: Emotional norms, emotion regulation and emotion practices operate to reproduce violence towards marginalised students and educators.

Resisting colonialism requires resisting emotional imperialism: Efforts to resist colonial violence and to find new ways of knowing, thinking and living must include efforts to resist emotional imperialism.

Resisting emotional imperialism requires developing new ways of relating: Resisting emotional imperialism requires becoming detached from imperial emotional norms and values and developing new ways of relating to others and to the world.