

Is Education a "pastime" or a "way of life"?

Post by "wbernys" of May 28, 2026 at 6:32 PM

An interesting passage is in Diogenes Laertius 138, which seems to have conflicting translations of education either being a hobby or skill. Inwood and Gerson translate it as

Quote

as Diogenes too says in book twenty of the Selections; he also says that basic education is a [form of] pastime.

Other people translate it as "recreation" including White (2021) This seems to imply that "basic education" is a hobby or a way to spend one's leisure? Like studying history of poetics for fun. This would seem to make Epicurus more friendly to Poetics than assumed, like Plutarch records Epicurus as saying the wise man will enjoy festivals, so long as it's kept clear of philosophy or assigned false importance. Alternatively this could be somewhat dismissive as saying that poetics is "only" a pastime at best and not something inherently noble.

Otherwise Bailey and Mensch translate it as

Quote

So Diogenes says too in the 20th book of *Miscellanies*, and he adds that education is a 'way of life. (Bailey)

This seems to imply that Education is like a skill, and in line with the context being the discussion on virtues this makes a good deal of sense of saying education tells us how to pass life in a respectable manner. Education is for the training of the how to live a pleasant life.

The Greek is καθά φησι καὶ Διογένης ἐν τῇ εἰκοστῇ τῶν Ἐπιλέκτων, ὃς καὶ διαγωγὴν λέγει τὴν ἀγωγὴν.

Post by "Bryan" of May 28, 2026 at 8:25 PM

The Diogenes referenced there is Diogenes of Tarsus. We know he wrote "Selections (Ἐπιλέκτα)," as well as an "Epitome of Epicurus' Ethical Doctrines."

The two words in question are closely related:

ἡ ἄγωγή = "conduct," "training," "discipline," "method/practice," literally "a leading."

ἡ διαγωγή = "way of life," "mode of living," "manner of spending one's life" literally "a leading through."

So this could be anything from "conduct is way of life" to "practice is a mode of living," to "education is recreation." ἡ ἄγωγή can mean "education" but only in context, and the typical word for "education" is ἡ παιδεία.

Here are some other potentially related quotes (education in each case is ἡ παιδεία):

"[*Epicurus is said*] to write in a letter to Pythocles 'Avoid all education, blessed one - after taking up a little boat!'" Diogenes Laertius (fl.c. 220 CE), 10.6

I shall recall the most truth-loving Epicurus: who, though he was uninitiated in general education - he considered those people blessed who were proceeding toward philosophy similarly to himself - uttering such words: 'I bless you, O dear one, because - clear of all education - You have rushed toward philosophy!'" Athenaeus (fl.c. 200 CE), *Deipnosophists*, 13.53

"Natural science makes men who are neither boasters, nor productive of discourse, nor showing themselves to be involved in the education that is much-contested among the public - but rather serious and also self-sufficient in their own particular goods - while not greatly considering things among the [current] situations" Epicurus, VS 45

"Through the writings of Epicurus all men and all women beg and plead with Pythocles - so that he does not desire the so-called "liberal" education" Plutarch (fl. 80 CE), *Non Posse*, 1094D, 12 sup.

"Epicurus, although he seems to be bitterly hostile to the Professors; in his book *On Gifts and Gratitude* he definitely tries to prove that it is necessary for the wise to learn grammar. Necessary, as we should say, not for the wise only but for all men." Sextus Empiricus (fl.c. 200 CE), *Against the Grammarians*, 1.49

Interestingly, in Greek, "school" is the opposite of "occupation"

ἡ σχολή αἱ σχολαί	school	ΣΧΟΛΗ leisure
ἡ ἀσχολία αἱ ἀσχολίαι	occupation	ΑΣΧΟΛΙΑ not leisure

Post by "Don" of May 28, 2026 at 10:18 PM

This διαγωγήν / ἀγωγήν seems right up Epicurus' alley for wordplay.

My favorite example is VS9: 9. Compulsion is a bad thing, but there is no compulsion to live under compulsion. κακὸν ἀνάγκη, ἀλλ' οὐδεμία ἀνάγκη ζῆν μετὰ ἀνάγκης.

[Quote from Bryan](#)

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So, the context of 138 is a discussion of pains and virtues (edited for emphasis):

Epicurus holds the pains of the mind to be the worse ;... he holds mental pleasures to be greater than those of the body. And as proof that pleasure is the end he adduces the fact that living things, so soon as they are born, are well content with pleasure and are at enmity with pain, by the prompting of nature and apart from reason. Left to our own feelings, then, we shun pain ;...[138] And we choose the virtues too on account of pleasure and not for their own sake,

.... **So too in the twentieth book of his Epilecta says Diogenes, who also calls education ἀγωγή recreation διαγωγή.** Epicurus describes virtue as the *sine qua non* of pleasure, i.e. the one thing without which pleasure cannot be, everything else, food, for instance, being separable, i.e. not indispensable to pleasure.

It appears to me what is being conveyed is that "training is a way of life." We don't simply train once and done. We don't attend a self-improvement session and that's it. The training to correctly pursue pleasure is a way of life, it's a lifetime project.

Post by “Pacatus” of May 30, 2026 at 12:32 PM

Does ἡ παιδεία (for Epicurus) refer to education in general (beyond certain technical matters, like grammar or, per Philodemus, household economics) – or to the particular programmatic content of what passed for a “proper education” for Greeks of the time (e.g., Homer)?

Post by “Bryan” of May 30, 2026 at 2:12 PM

Epicurus encouraged the avoidance of paideia, but this clearly did not mean the avoidance of “learning in general.” He expected people to read, understand grammar, grasp the basics of physics, and think carefully about epistemology. He accepts all useful learning, but rejects becoming a “professional” in any one field.

"Both those around Epicurus and those around Pyrrho seem more commonly inclined to the opposition toward those from the professions. Those around Epicurus [oppose the professions, on the grounds] that the professions contribute nothing to the perfection of wisdom "

Sextus Empiricus (fl.c. 200 CE), *Against the Grammarians*, 1-3

It seems that Epicurus even wrote a letter giving advice to people who were caught in a profession.

"Seneca to his Lucilius, greetings.

You now understand that you must be led out of those flashy and harmful occupations, but you ask how you might achieve that... so look around for this – if you see this, grab it with full force and all your strength: strive to strip yourself from those duties... Read the letter of Epicurus that pertains to this very issue, the one addressed to Idomeneus, whom Epicurus urges to flee as

much as he can and to hurry, before some greater force intervenes and takes away the freedom to withdraw.

He nevertheless adds that nothing should be attempted unless it can be done suitably and at the right time. But when that long-awaited time finally comes, he says one must leap out. He forbids the one thinking about flight to fall asleep, and he hopes for a saving exit even from the most difficult things, if only we do not rush before the right time, nor delay at the right time."

Seneca (fl. 35 CE), Letters to Lucilius, Letter 22, sections 1-5