A Critical Discourse Analysis of Digital Transformation Policies in Vietnamese Education

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Abstract

This research critically examines how Vietnam's digital transformation in education is constructed through national policies, the ideologies underpinning this construction, and how it interacts with the wider societal context. Drawing on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), it analyzes a corpus of sixteen selected policy documents, combining corpus-assisted techniques using the software AntConc, close qualitative reading, and external literature on sociocultural dynamics to identify patterns in linguistic choice, underlying ideological assumptions, and the sociocultural context that legitimizes the policy discourse. The analysis reveals that the policy corpus predominantly frames digital transformation as inevitable and inherently progressive, reflecting a techno-optimistic and neoliberal lens supported by complex linguistic strategies, including lexical choices, high-modality expressions, genre mixing, and strategic selection of sentence types. By situating the policy corpus within discursive and sociocultural contexts, this research shows how this framing reflects the socialist-led neoliberal ideology that increasingly shapes the Vietnamese education landscape, while simultaneously marginalizing sociocultural dynamics rooted in longstanding Confucian and Buddhist perspectives that have historically influenced Vietnamese education in areas such as moral education, respect for teachers, intrinsic motivation for learning, and collective responsibility. These dynamics have contributed to policies that favor competitiveness over collaboration, position teachers as secondary to technology, and prioritize technical skills over intrinsic motivation for learning and moral considerations. The research contributes to critical policy scholarship, which is notably scarce in the politically sensitive Vietnamese context. Rather than supporting the continued pursuit of external metrics, it calls for reimagining future directions grounded in a journey inward, reclaiming trust in sociocultural values for a culturally responsive approach to digital transformation in education.

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ABBREVIATIONS	
4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
AI	Artificial Intelligence
AR	Augmented Reality
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CPV	Communist Party of Vietnam
EdTech	Education Technology
IT	Information Technology
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IoT	Internet of Things
LLM(s)	Large Language Model(s)
LMS	Learning Management Systems
ML	Machine Learning
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
MOOCs	Massive Open Online Courses
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

Introduction

" [....] educational technology is not value-free but value-laden, and therefore something that can be trusted and distrusted, agreed and disagreed with."

— Neil Selwyn, Distrusting Educational Technology: Critical Questions for Changing Times (2014, p. 3).

Digital Technologies as the norms

From early room-sized computers to today's pocket-sized smartphones, and from the advent of the World Wide Web to the explosion of global internet connectivity, digital technologies have rapidly transitioned from novel tools to universal norms embedded in virtually every facet of daily life (Yang & Li, 2016). In many parts of the world, it is now harder to find anyone without a digital device, or any company that lacks a digital system for information storage and online communication. In this research, I adopt Berger's (2023) definition of "digital technologies" as systems that use discrete binary values to transmit information, enabling greater fidelity, improved error correction, and more efficient storage and processing than analog systems, which present physical quantities through continuous signals and were predominant before the 1940s. Examples of digital technologies include the Internet, smartphones, tablets, AI and ML.

These technologies have driven global internet connectivity from a few million users in the 1990s to approximately 5.54 billion in 2024, representing 67.9 percent of the world's population (Kemp, 2024). This growth reflects an interconnected world, with new points continually added to the global connectivity map. These technologies are widely considered disruptive due to the vast opportunities and structural changes they generate, as well as the societal challenges and concerns they bring. On the one hand, they generate more job opportunities, especially in technical fields. Globally, jobs related to IT and more recently AI/ML have grown significantly, attracting a large number of professionals seeking better pay and career prospects (Acemoglu et al., 2022; Georgieff & Hyee, 2022). Just a few decades ago, technologies capable of holding conversations with humans or handling

non-routine tasks seemed unimaginable. Today, however, tools like Siri, Alexa, facial recognition, LLMs such as ChatGPT and Grok, and social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok are widely accessible (Frąckiewicz, 2025).

Although these technologies are often recognized for enhancing productivity, efficiency, and human connection, they have simultaneously raised significant societal concerns (Bishop et al., 2020). Various professions, from low- to high-skill and routine to non-routine tasks, have been or are at risk of being replaced by technologies, especially industrial robots and AI (Filippi et al., 2023). Prominent figures like Stephen Hawking and Elon Musk have expressed growing fears of dystopian futures once confined to science fiction (Torresen, 2018). New crimes such as identity theft, cyber hacking, and data misuse have become more prevalent. The emergence of these technologies also challenge conventional notions of "connection", as we now live in the most connected yet mentally disconnected era in history (Nguyen, 2023). This unprecedented disruption emphasizes the urgent need to examine digital transformation across sectors to align technologies with social good while minimizing threats to society and individuals.

In this research, I focus specifically on digital transformation in education, a traditionally human-centered, socially embedded sector that most people engage with extensively from early childhood through early adulthood as students. By 2020, 86.9 percent of the global population had attained some form of basic education (Ritchie et al., 2023). Thus, changes reshaping education impact vast numbers of students, educators, and staff across generations, moving education beyond the sole influence of traditional stakeholders such as teachers and institutions, toward greater involvement of new actors including technology corporations, software developers, AI-powered learning platforms, and data analytics companies (Selwyn, 2016). This shift creates a landscape of opportunities and challenges requiring critical engagement and comprehensive policy frameworks, which this research examines within the Vietnamese context.

Why Vietnam and Vietnamese Education?

Vietnam presents a compelling case for analysis due to its unique political landscape, governed by a single Communist Party yet operating within an increasingly globalized economy that favors Western models (Anh-Susann, 2022). Since the transformative Đổi Mới[1] reforms of 1986, Vietnam has transitioned from a centrally planned system to a dynamic, export-oriented economy pursuing greater decentralization and market-driven policies (Nguyen, 2016). Politically, unlike other Communist states such as China and North Korea, Vietnam has lower power concentration, greater tolerance for civic engagement, and higher acceptance of foreign norms and ideologies (Hualing & Buhi, 2018; Vu, 2023). This distinctive mix of rigidity and flexibility, combined with the government's digital ambitions, makes Vietnam an instructive case for examining how a one-party state navigates digital transformation.

Vietnam's education system is tightly controlled, with key decisions centralized in the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and closely aligned with Communist Party directives (Nguyen et al., 2020). Educators and students, though most directly engaged, have limited autonomy and are expected to conform to top-down mandates (Nguyen, 2022). This power imbalance significantly affects a large portion of the population, as education holds a central position in Vietnam due to its deep Confucian roots, socialist ideology linking education to nation-building and morality, and societal beliefs that academic success drives upward mobility (Vu, 2022). This importance is reflected in Vietnam's public spending on education, accounting for about 20 percent of the budget (Global Partnership for Education, 2025). In major cities, households may spend up to 47 percent of income on education, covering everything from private tutoring services to international schools, some of which charge tuition as high as $30,000 per year (Vietnam Investment Review, 2024; Vu, 2024), a significant figure given the country's average yearly income of $3,500 as of 2020 (Pham et al, 2024).

Recent years have seen growing adoption of technology in Vietnamese education across both public and private sectors, marked by investments in digital infrastructure, expansion of

[1] Economic reforms launched in 1986, shifting Vietnam toward a socialist-oriented market economy while retaining one-party rule

online learning platforms, and government initiatives to integrate ICT in classrooms (Nguyen, 2023). These shifts form a critical context for exploring digital transformation policy discourse within Vietnam's socio-political setting.

However, a research gap currently exists, as there is a notable lack of scholarship critically examining digital transformation policies in Vietnamese education through a critical discourse analysis lens. This absence may be attributed to the political sensitivity surrounding the topic. Nonetheless, such inquiry is essential. I argue that understanding Vietnam's education system and its transformation demands situating it within its broader political and socio-political framework. In this research, I seek to address this gap by analyzing top-down policy narratives on digital transformation, focusing on how the need for transformation is constructed and legitimized and uncovering the ideological assumptions and discursive strategies underpinning these narratives. The aim is to explore the extent to which this transformation aligns with the interests of students, educators, and society as a whole.

What and Why Policies?

In this research, "policies" are understood broadly as a diverse range of official documents issued by authoritative agencies such as the government or MOET that provide authoritative guidance on digital transformation in education, including resolutions, decisions, and circulars. Specific criteria for document selection are explained in Chapter 2, "Methodology".

Among ways to examine state-led discourse on digital transformation, policy analysis is particularly appropriate. Policies serve not only as administrative tools but also as discursive vehicles for ideological expression (Fairclough, 2003). They articulate state priorities, define problems and solutions, and construct certain actions as necessary. Analyzing policy reveals not only *what* changes are proposed but also *how* change is framed and *why* certain narratives are advanced over others (Bacchi, 2009).

Interpretative approaches such as CDA are well suited for this task. CDA systematically explores implicit biases and assumptions embedded in texts, moving from surface description to deeper critique of how meanings are constructed and normalized (Mulderrig et al., 2019). The specific CDA framework selected for this research, Fairclough's three dimensional model, involves a comprehensive three-stage analysis focusing on linguistic features, discursive practices, and sociocultural contexts (Fairclough, 2003). Compared to van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, which emphasizes cognitive structures, or Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach, which prioritizes historical context, Fairclough's model provides a balanced CDA framework for connecting textual analysis to broader social practices. It is well-suited to this research, revealing how language reflects and reinforces power, shaping what is included and excluded. It thus helps challenge dominant ideas, highlight inequalities, and open space for alternative perspectives (Cummings et al., 2020).

This framework is especially relevant in Communist-led states like Vietnam, where state ideology heavily influences policy, particularly in education, where conformity to official values is emphasized (Nguyen, 2022). By examining how narratives are constructed and legitimized in this context, the analysis can identify dominant discourses, reveal whose interests they serve, and consider possibilities for alternative viewpoints.

Chapter 1: A Review of the Literature

Given the interdisciplinary and multi-layered nature of the topic, which connects digital transformation, education, and policy within a distinctive socio-political context, this chapter is divided into three interrelated sections. The first section defines key concepts and traces the historical emergence of digital transformation in education, together with how it is theorized within global literature and scholarly perspectives on policy governance in this realm. The second section situates this conceptual and policy discussion within the context of Vietnam. The final section introduces CDA alongside the selected analytical framework, Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model, which together provide the conceptual and methodological foundation for the study. It discusses how CDA and Fairclough's model have been used in policy research, particularly in education, and explains its relevance for uncovering the ideological and discursive processes that shape policy narratives. This structure supports a comprehensive and coherent engagement with the cross-disciplinary literature relevant that informs the research objectives.

Section 1: Digital Transformation In Global Education: Concepts, Perspectives, and Policy

1.1. Key Concepts and Historical Emergence

The widespread adoption of digital technologies, particularly AI, has significantly reshaped society and education, making "digital transformation", "digital education", and "digitalization" central to numerous discussions across sectors and policies. Although these terms are often treated as synonymous (Hess, 2020; Tratkowska, 2019), this research treats them as interconnected yet distinct. Digitalization is conceptualized as the initial stage of digital transformation, wherein institutions adopt new digital tools to perform existing activities (Díaz-García et al., 2022). Digital transformation involves a broader strategic shift, encompassing changes in organizational culture, structure, and value creation driven by digital technologies (Verhoef et al., 2021). Digital education refers to the complex application of digital technologies in formal and informal teaching and learning contexts (Lynn et al.,

2022), marking shifts in the pedagogical realm of education, such as teacher-student interaction, learning styles, and assessment methods (Lynn et al., 2022). Based on these definitions, digitalization can be seen as a phase within the larger digital transformation process, both within and beyond education, while digital education represents a pedagogical shift within this broader framework. More broadly, digital transformation also encompasses non-pedagogical shifts such as changes in managerial practices, stakeholder roles, workflow structures, and even the underlying purposes of education (Díaz-García et al., 2022). In this research, it is important to acknowledge that the term digital transformation is sometimes used interchangeably with digitalization in discussions focused on technological processes, and with digital education when the emphasis lies on pedagogical shifts.

Far from a recent phenomenon, digital transformation in education is the latest chapter in a centuries-long trajectory of technological integration. As Selwyn (2017) notes, this history stretches back thousands of years, with early examples including "the Mesopotamian abacus around 2700 BC" (p.46). Nevertheless, it is the technological advances of the twentieth century, especially those involving digital computation and communication, that offer the most relevant context for understanding the present era of digital education (Selwyn, 2019).

The personal computer era that began in the 1970s, marked by the introduction of desktop computers into classrooms, brought with it widespread enthusiasm for an educational revolution. During this time, individualized computer tutors were widely promoted, and there was a strong push to develop computer literacy among students (Howard, 2015). Nevertheless, these developments faced criticism for promoting passive learning and exacerbating digital divides between well-resourced and under-resourced schools (Howard, 2015). Building on this legacy, the current Internet and Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) era is considered more expansive in scope, offering a broader range of digital tools, including cloud computing, social media, AI, and immersive technologies like VR and AR (Howard, 2015; Mhlangda, 2024). These tools have enabled the global spread of LMS, digital libraries and databases, and learning analytics. Concurrently, EdTech has become a lucrative industry, with "Big Tech" companies increasingly presenting their products as solutions to persistent educational challenges while also offering new kinds of learning experiences (Williamson,

2022). Corporations like Google, Apple, and Microsoft have extended their influence through platforms such as Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams, as well as cloud infrastructures and automated services that support data collection, analytics, and education system management (Williamson, 2022). Educational institutions worldwide have undergone "platformization", integrating digital systems that reshape teaching, learning, governance, and administration (Williamson, 2017). These changes have led to diverse theoretical and conceptual perspectives on digital transformation in education, as discussed in the following sub-section.

1.2. Broad Spectrum of Thoughts

Discussions around digital transformation in education span a broad spectrum of scholarly perspectives. At either end of this spectrum sit two dominant, often contrasting, frameworks: *techno-optimism* and *techno-pessimism*. These perspectives shape how scholars interpret the role of technology in education, define the challenges to digital transformation, and understand its limitations.

Techno-optimism, which often overlaps with techno-solutionism and techno-centrism, views technology as a solution to longstanding educational challenges. It emphasizes the potential of digital tools to improve accessibility, flexibility, system efficiency, and learning personalization across education systems (Bishop et al., 2020). Technologies like AI are praised for enhancing cognitive development and developing new capabilities previously beyond reach (Tuomi, 2018). They are seen as expanding teachers' capacity, improving institutional workflows, reducing costs, and speeding up processes (Selwyn, 2016; 2017). Within this view, the main obstacles to digital transformation are often identified as underdeveloped ICT infrastructure, low digital literacy among stakeholders, and insufficient investment in educational innovation (Timotheou et al., 2023; van der Vlies, 2020). This techno-optimistic view is common in technology and engineering fields, where critiques of education as outdated and in need of a "digital fix" are widespread (Selwyn, 2016, p.7). Technology is thus seen as a largely positive force capable of delivering the necessary "digital disruption", "revolution", and "reinvention" of education (Nemorin et al., 2023).

On the other end of the spectrum, techno-pessimism emphasizes that technology is not neutral but shaped by the interests, values, and intentions of its creators, as well as broader socio-economic and political dynamics (Oliver, 2011). It warns of the negative, sometimes harmful, consequences of digital technologies, pointing to an "EdTech dystopia" shaped by the Silicon Valley vision (Weller, 2020, p.179). Concerns include the growing commercialization and datafication of education, which normalize surveillance, algorithmic injustice, and privacy violations while reinforcing existing inequalities (Birhane, 2021; Komljenovic, 2021; Macgilchrist, 2018; Weller, 2020). These effects often harm already marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities who are excluded by inaccessible designs (Lynn et al., 2022), racial and ethnic minorities like Black students who are underrepresented in AI training datasets (Macgilchrist, 2018), and women, non-white individuals, and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups who are misrepresented or erased by biased algorithms (Chaka, 2022; Sahlgren, 2023). Other criticisms include the deprofessionalization of teachers, whose roles risk being reduced to technology facilitators (Weller, 2020), and the development of mechanistic pedagogies that reduce the complex human nature of teaching and learning into quantifiable metrics, eroding the dignity of educators and students (Selwyn & Gašević, 2020; Tuomi, 2018). Environmental harms caused by tech production, energy use, and electronic waste are also increasingly noted (Selwyn, 2023; Shengjergji et al., 2024). Through this lens, the challenges of digital transformation are not merely operational or financial but deeply connected to neoliberal logic—an ideology prioritizing free market principles, competition, minimal state intervention, and values such as efficiency, competitiveness, and productivity (Yin & Mu, 2023). This logic also embeds unequal power structures that shape and constrain how digital transformation is understood and discussed (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016; Weller, 2020).

Across the spectrum, many scholars call for nuanced and critically engaged perspectives that address techno-pessimism's systemic concerns without dismissing technology's benefits (Selwyn, 2023; Weller, 2020). Weller (2020) warns against binary thinking, arguing that such oversimplification serves EdTech marketing narratives that frame any criticism as anti-progress. Instead, digital transformation should be seen as a socio-technical process intertwined with cultural, social, and economic contexts (Bayne, 2015; Kerssens & van

Dijck, 2022). This involves questioning underlying assumptions (Selwyn, 2016), examining how language and metaphors shape our understanding of technology (Weller, 2020), challenging Eurocentric norms in educational technology (Adam, 2019; Zembylas, 2023), and working toward a form of "non-stupid optimism" that genuinely supports human flourishing (Selwyn, 2021). These reflections open space for reimagining technology integration in education in ways that are more equitable, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of diverse communities. Some of these alternative approaches are discussed in the following sub-section.

1.3. Critical Perspectives and Theoretical Lenses Beyond Binary Conceptualization

Posthumanist Approach to Technology: Posthumanism is a broad philosophical paradigm that questions human exceptionalism and challenges long-standing dualisms separating human from non-human entities, mind from body, and nature from culture (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017; Herbrechter, 2024). This approach rejects both the instrumentalist view of technology as merely a tool for human-defined goals and the deterministic view of technology as an autonomous force shaping human and social structures (Herbrechter, 2024). Instead, posthumanist thought moves beyond an anthropocentric perspective, situating humans within deep, inextricable entanglements with technology, the broader non-human world, and ecological systems, rather than viewing them as independent actors (Keeling & Lehman, 2018). This philosophy encompasses a rich variety of theoretical frameworks, notably sociomaterialism and actor-network theory (ANT), both of which emphasize the co-constitutive relationship between humans and technology that traditional humanist frameworks often overlook (Postma, 2020). For example, Introna and Hayes (2011) draw on posthumanist thinking to critique definitions of plagiarism based on the number of consecutive character matches between Greek students' writing and original sources, as measured by technologies like Turnitin. Such reliance on technical definitions fails to capture the educational context of Greece, where textbook-based learning and rote memorization have normalized direct textual reproduction. Posthumanism thus helps expose how technologies and broader sociocultural values together co-produce norms, showing that

neither purely technical nor purely social explanations are sufficient to understand academic integrity as a locally situated, non-universal concept.

A Decolonial Approach: As a critical framework, decoloniality challenges the enduring power structures, epistemic systems, and institutional practices that reproduce colonially in the post-colonial context (Grosfoguel, 2007; Quijano, 2007). This approach questions the universalization of Western hegemonic knowledge systems, which persist through digital innovations like MOOCs and Supported Open Learning projects in Global South countries (Farrow et al., 2023; Morgan, 2023), as well as through datafication processes—the practice of converting diverse forms of information into "machine-readable digital data" (Macgilchrist, 2019, p. 3) embedded in citation indices, global university rankings, and standardized assessments (Prinsloo, 2020). In practice, decoloniality requires collective efforts from diverse stakeholders. Scholars like Cruz (2021), for example, advocate participatory design processes for EdTech development, where developers collaborate with local communities to include indigenous knowledge and values rather than having them marginalized in favor of market logic. Similarly, Bayeck and Asino (2024) emphasize the importance of maintaining critical reflection throughout all phases of implementation to ensure digital innovations remain responsive to community contexts. Scholars such as Costa et al. (2023) and Karetai et al. (2023) also emphasize the need for curricular reimagining in schools, both to center indigenous epistemologies and to promote collaborative knowledge creation among students, acting as key steps in challenging the legacies of colonialism within educational systems.

Critical Data Literacies and Data Justice: In an increasingly datafied educational landscape, critical data literacies move beyond conventional notions of technical skills acquisition. They advocate for individuals to develop a deep, nuanced understanding of data collection and processing (Chaka, 2022; Emejulu & McGregor, 2016). This also includes broader engagement with datafication as these practices often perpetuate neo-colonial dynamics, with Global South learners' data extracted and commodified by large corporations (Chaka, 2022), while reinforcing systemic biases against marginalized groups based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Taylor, 2024). A data justice framework is therefore vital for

advancing equity in the representation and visibility of individuals throughout the data production process (Taylor, 2017). One influential model is Taylor's (2017) tripartite framework of data justice, which focuses on "(in)visibility, (dis)engagement with technology, and antidiscrimination" (p.1). This framework directly challenges dominant data protection paradigms and critiques the assumption that digital visibility is essential for social participation. Complementing this, a relational approach to data justice (Perrotta, 2023) offers a more nuanced understanding of bias and harm in algorithmic systems by situating these problems within broader structures of historical privilege and power. Rather than framing them as isolated technical errors, this perspective draws attention to their embeddedness in enduring societal inequalities.

These are by no means the only alternative frameworks addressing digital education and digital transformation. However, they represent some key critical approaches in current scholarship that aim to foster more meaningful engagements with technology in education. Some of these frameworks are revisited in Chapter 4 for a contextualized discussion following the presentation of findings. Other relevant frameworks not covered here include radical digital citizenship (Emejulu & McGregor, 2019), critical platform gaze (Decuypere et al., 2021), and digital degrowth or postdigital ecopedagogies (Selwyn, 2024). These wide-ranging perspectives make clear that digital transformation in education is far from a straightforward process. What was once a predominantly human-centered landscape is now entangled with fast-moving technological forces, demanding a rethinking of how digital transformation in education should be governed. These tensions have made the role of policy more critical than ever, both as a framework for governance and as a mechanism through which values are negotiated and operationalized. In the following sub-section, I explore how scholarly debates around policy priorities reflect deeper tensions over what values should be prioritized and whose interests should be served.

1.4. Role of Policy in Governing Digital Transformation in Education

In this rapidly evolving educational landscape, a recurring theme in scholarly work is the importance of policy frameworks in guiding effective strategies for all stakeholders, even amid persistent debates over policy priorities (Walkington & Bernacki, 2020). As many

regions confront the digital divide, some argue that addressing this gap should be a central policy focus. Policies need to ensure that all learners have access to essential infrastructure, including high-speed internet, affordable devices, and stable electricity (Mhlanga, 2024). Recognizing that new technologies often benefit those already privileged, Bishop et al. (2020) propose a three-level policy intervention to address the divide: Level 1 (Infrastructure and Access), Level 2 (Effective Use), and Level 3 (Meaningful Outcomes).

Framing digital transformation as an urgent necessity requiring people to adapt, some perspectives see policy as a strategic compass for developing digital competencies and supporting professional development (Miao et al., 2021; Timotheou et al., 2023). This involves creating competency frameworks tailored to the evolving teaching environment and encouraging continuous professional learning in digital instruction (Miao et al., 2021). There is also growing policy attention to AI literacy, with curriculum reforms aimed at aligning learning goals with emerging technological landscapes (Janardhanan et al., 2023).

Others emphasize that policy must address more critical concerns, such as data privacy and ethics, which directly interferes with students' freedom, rights, and dignity (Nemorin et al., 2023; Zembylas, 2023). In this view, ethical policymaking includes developing inclusive and equitable frameworks for AI and educational data use. This involves ensuring transparency and accountability in data governance, testing technologies for privacy protection, and designing mechanisms to prevent discrimination (Miao et al., 2021; Zembylas, 2023). Increasingly, ethical issues are seen as foundational to AI policy, shifting focus from merely limiting harm to actively fostering inclusion (Schiff, 2022). This requires critical examination of how algorithmic tools may reproduce social and racial biases under the guise of neutrality (Nemorin et al., 2023).

Another prominent concern is the commercialization of education, particularly the growing influence of large technology corporations (Poquet & Laat, 2021; Selwyn, 2019). From this perspective, policy should protect educational autonomy at both institutional and professional levels. This means enabling schools and teachers to maintain control over curriculum and delivery without being constrained by commercial interests and market logic (Kerssens & van Dijck, 2022). Such autonomy can be supported through resource interoperability and the

promotion of diverse, non-proprietary tools rather than dependence on closed corporate systems (Kerssens & van Dijck, 2022).

Overall, what policy should prioritize remains a contested question. There is a clear divide among scholars, with some focusing on enhancing ICT infrastructure and connectivity, and others emphasizing the importance of a rights-based approach to data privacy, ethical governance, and limiting commercial influence to protect the autonomy of educators and institutions.

1.5. Section Summary

The literature portrays digital transformation in education as a multifaceted phenomenon involving technological, pedagogical, social, and political shifts. While technologies promise enhanced learning opportunities and greater efficiency, they also bring pressing concerns about equity, data privacy, commercialization, and the reproduction of existing social inequalities. Critical perspectives challenge overly deterministic or binary narratives about technology and call for context-sensitive and inclusive approaches that recognize local values and histories.

However, much of this scholarship and policymaking emerges from Western contexts, where infrastructure, institutional capacities, and socio-cultural conditions differ substantially from those in many developing countries. Consequently, the assumptions, priorities, and policy prescriptions found in these works may not align with the lived realities of contexts such as Vietnam. Understanding digital transformation in such contexts requires careful attention to local sociocultural foundations, resource constraints, and governance challenges. The following section turns to Vietnam’s digital transformation in education and scholarly perspectives on the policies guiding it, aiming to situate these global debates within a particular national context.

Section 2: Vietnamese Digital Transformation in Education and Policy Landscape

This section begins with a general overview of digital transformation in Vietnamese education and the prevailing policy orientations, then draws on relevant literature to examine how this phenomenon and related policy strategies are addressed in academic discourse. In doing so, it uncovers the dominant scholarly perspectives on policy mandates and situates the use of CDA within the broader field of research on this topic.

2.1. A Brief Overview of Vietnamese Digital Transformation in Education and Policy

Vietnam is classified as a lower-middle-income country within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (The World Bank, 2025). Since COVID-19, it has actively pursued digital transformation, significantly reshaping its economic structures, social dynamics, and consumer behavior. This push, alongside broad embrace of foreign direct investment and private sector growth, has laid the groundwork for the rise of private education and EdTech companies since the 2010s, including those with foreign investment (Ngo et al., 2023). Compared to technologically advanced countries like the United States and China, Vietnam remains in an early stage of development; however, its education sector is undergoing digital transformation through increased use of LMS platforms, widespread adoption of blended learning models, and the institutionalization of data-driven governance systems, such as the unified Higher Education Management Information Systems (HEMIS) (Le, 2024).

These shifts stem largely from top-down political directives. Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese government has issued comprehensive policies supporting digital transformation across all education levels and domains, including STEM education, administration, pedagogical methods, assessment systems, open-access resources, and digital literacy (Tuong et al., 2023). Encouraged technologies range from AI and big data analytics to VR and AR, reflecting the transformation's breadth (Tuong et al., 2023). A major driver behind this shift is the Prime Minister’s Decision No. 749/QD-TTg, approving the “National Digital Transformation Program by 2025, with a Vision Towards 2030”. This directive mandates the comprehensive application of digital technology across the entire

education system, aiming for 100 percent of institutions to offer remote learning by 2030 (The Prime Minister, 2020).

2.2. Academic Discourses on Digital Transformation and Its Policies

Scholarly discussions of policy mandates and practical shifts in Vietnam's digital education transformation appear ideologically consistent, which I argue predominantly reflects a techno-optimistic and depoliticized framing. This framing is particularly visible in how scholars discuss the benefits, challenges, and recommended policy strategies. In terms of potential benefits, digital transformation is seen as a tool to expand educational access, especially for students in remote or underserved areas, and as a means to address inequality in schooling (Nhung et al., 2025). It promotes learner autonomy, creativity, and active participation, supporting the vision of a lifelong learning society with accessible opportunities across time and space (Tri & Hoang, 2023). It is also seen as crucial for preparing a workforce aligned with Industry 4.0 demands and global competitiveness, particularly through an emphasis on STEM education and digital skills (Tri & Hoang, 2023; Tuong et al., 2023). Other advantages include enhanced student engagement, personalized learning experiences (Le, 2024), and the potential for long-term cost savings in educational provision (Uoc, 2023). Regarding government policy strategies for promoting digital transformation, there is a significant lack of scholarship using policy analysis to examine policy discourse. One of the few studies that does so is Nguyen et al. (2024); however, it focuses exclusively on applying Epistemic Network Analysis (ENA) to identify recurring themes in digital transformation policies, such as governance, vision, quality, and infrastructure, without critically engaging with the underlying political motives. Other literature only mention policy in passing within broader discussions of digital transformation. For instance, a growing body of scholarship acknowledges policy efforts in digital transformation as significant, often praising the government's role in modernizing the education system (Hai, 2024; Truong, 2023; Nhan, 2024). Nhan (2024) argues that the integration of a national database for preschool and high school has centralized key information, including 1.6 million teacher profiles and 24 million student records, thereby supporting more effective educational management. Other studies praise these policies for

their potential to enhance student engagement and offer alternative instructional strategies (Hai, 2024; Tuong et al., 2023).

Alongside these opportunities, the literature also draws attention to ongoing constraints in digital transformation and its policy. The first is infrastructural inequality, particularly in rural areas where high-speed internet and technology are often lacking (Truong et al., 2023). Even urban universities may be limited by outdated IT infrastructure, which restricts access to digital systems (Le, 2024). Skills shortage is addressed as another problematic area. Students and teachers alike face skill gaps, and adaptation tends to be slower among older academic staff (Nhung et al., 2025; Thanh et al., 2024). The inconsistent quality of digital learning materials also undermines effectiveness, raising concerns about their credibility and relevance (Thanh et al., 2024; Trung, 2025). The legal and policy environment has yet to fully support digital transformation. Ambiguities in regulation concerning online learning accreditation, intellectual property, and assessment practices create implementation barriers (Trung, 2025). These are compounded by financial challenges, especially for institutions that lack the resources to invest in the necessary technologies (Le, 2024; Trung, 2025). Institutional and cultural practices present additional resistance. Traditional preferences for passive learning remain widespread, and innovation is sometimes met with skepticism (Tri & Hoang, 2023). The pace of change varies considerably across institutions, creating inequalities in access and outcomes (Le, 2024).

In light of these challenges, scholars have recommended various strategic priorities and solutions for policy frameworks. In terms of priorities, Uoc (2023) emphasizes the need for broader awareness and shared commitment to digital transformation among stakeholders. Tri and Hoang (2023) argues that infrastructural development remains a crucial component, especially in improving internet connectivity and digital access, with public-private partnerships identified as a key enabler. For solutions, Tuong et al. (2023) promotes the building of Open Educational Resources where digital learning materials can be collaboratively created and shared across institutions. Thanh et al. (2024) emphasizes the strengthening of the relationship between academia and industry to maintain digital education’s relevance and responsiveness to the labor market. Scholars also propose

recommendations for more effective policies, commonly emphasizing six areas: increasing financial investment, improving digital infrastructure and access, enhancing professional development, refining legal frameworks, developing high-quality digital content, and fostering public-private collaboration (Hai, 2024; Truong, 2023; Nhan, 2024; Uoc, 2023).

2.3. Section Summary

Building on the earlier discussion of techno-optimism, I argue that the literature on Vietnam's digital transformation and its policies follows a similar logic. Much of the literature frames digital transformation's necessity in terms of expanding access, enhancing efficiency, and supporting personalized learning, and treats infrastructural gaps, skill shortages, and institutional limitations as technical problems to solve. It embeds assumptions about modernity, development, and progress, influencing which problems are considered important, which solutions are prioritized, and whose voices are legitimate. This framing assumes technological advancement is inherently beneficial, leaving political, ideological, and contextual dimensions underexplored. This is where CDA proves valuable, offering a method to interrogate these assumptions and uncover the ideological and discursive structures underpinning policy narratives. These dynamics are examined in the following section.

Section 3: CDA and Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model in Education Research

3.1. CDA

CDA is a multifaceted qualitative approach that explores the interconnections between language, ideology, and power in society. Rather than merely describing language, CDA examines why language takes particular forms and how meaning is constructed through various discursive practices, including written texts and spoken communication (Brown, 2019). The origins of CDA can be traced back to the late 1970s, with the emergence of "Critical Linguistics", introduced by Roger Fowler and Gunther Kress in their 1979 work "Language and Control" (Liu & Go, 2016). While Critical Linguistics focused on revealing power relations framed through language, CDA broadened this focus by incorporating

insights from social theory, thereby moving beyond linguistic structures to encompass wider social dynamics (Fairclough, 2013).

Influenced by the Frankfurt School and neo-Marxist traditions, CDA researchers challenge the notion that language and knowledge are neutral (Luke, 1995; Rogers, 2011). Language is seen as a social practice that actively constructs and legitimizes social realities and hierarchies, rather than passively reflecting them. CDA is thus committed to exposing and challenging the injustices and power relations embedded in discourse (Luke, 1995; Rogers, 2011). Its interdisciplinary nature draws from fields such as systemic functional linguistics, sociology, psychology, and media studies, providing a comprehensive understanding of how discourse mediates, reflects, and reproduces social power structures (van Dijk, 1985).

In educational research, particularly within English-speaking contexts, CDA has become increasingly prominent in areas such as policy analysis, literacy, and identity. For instance, Mulderrig (2024) used CDA to examine the UK's "Teaching Excellence Framework" (TEF), revealing how it reflects neoliberal values and constructs students as consumers. Another study conducted in South Africa highlights how dominant discourses in educational technology prioritize efficiency over meaningful learning outcomes, thereby marginalizing students who lack digital literacy (Brown, 2019). Within classroom settings, CDA can empower both educators and students to recognize and challenge systemic inequalities, such as racialized narratives that reinforce the "white mythical norm" (Desrochers & Murray, 2021, p.130). In this sense, CDA emphasizes contextual, historical, and socio-political knowledge in shaping discourse production and interpretation—knowledge often obscured by surface-level analysis (Brown, 2019).

Despite its contributions, CDA has been subject to criticism. Some scholars argue that it constitutes an ideological reading of texts rather than an objective form of analysis. They contend that CDA researchers may select texts and conduct analyses in ways that confirm pre-existing ideological positions (Rogers, 2011). I acknowledge these concerns but maintain that they do not inherently diminish CDA's value. CDA adopts a subjectivist stance, recognizing that complete neutrality in social research is neither attainable nor necessarily

desirable. What matters instead is the researcher's commitment to transparency, reflexivity, and the incorporation of diverse evidence and alternative interpretations.

Another critique comes from Jones (2007), whose article titled "*Why There is No Such Thing as "Critical Discourse Analysis"*" argues that CDA often treats language as "abstract, self-contained system of forms, meanings, and rules" (p.338). According to Jones, this risks disconnecting linguistic analysis from the real-world political and moral conditions it seeks to address. He further argues that social and political critique cannot rely solely on linguistics, but must be grounded in broader contextual realities. While this critique raises valid concerns, I argue that CDA comprises a wide range of frameworks and interpretive approaches. The extent to which a CDA study remains abstract or grounded in context depends on the methodological choices and interpretive skill of the researcher. CDA encompasses a range of tools and perspectives, some of which are more attentive to context than others (Meyer, 2001). Moreover, its interdisciplinary character allows for the integration of linguistic analysis with insights from other disciplines to explore how discourse operates within specific power structures (van Dijk, 1985). Discourse does not exist in isolation, and any language analysis must connect to the social and political environments in which it occurs.

3.2. Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

This research adopts Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of CDA, hereafter referred to as Fairclough's model or framework. The model examines discourse through three interrelated dimensions. First, Textual Analysis focuses on linguistic features such as vocabulary, semantics, and syntax, aiming to describe the internal structure of the text. Second, Discursive Practice examines how the text is produced, distributed, and consumed within specific institutional and cultural settings. Third, Sociocultural Practice considers the broader socio-political and institutional contexts in which discourse is situated, uncovering power structures and ideological assumptions. This third dimension is particularly significant in responding to Jones' (2007) critique that CDA is disconnected from material realities. Fairclough's framework embeds social context within the analytical process, thereby

demonstrating that discourse cannot be separated from the structures of power it both reflects and perpetuates.

Fairclough's model has been extensively applied in research across diverse countries and fields to reveal hidden meanings and ideological foundations within educational materials and policies (Ahmad & Shah, 2019; Klausen, 2023; Shume, 2023). In their analysis of English language textbooks in Punjab, Ahmad and Shah (2019) use the model to reveal how gender hierarchies are subtly embedded in word choices and other language features, showing not only the implicit prioritization of male viewpoints but also how these discourses reflect and reinforce gendered disparities in everyday life. Building on similar applications of Fairclough's model to textbook discourse, Shume (2023) applies Fairclough's model to critically examine how disability is portrayed through deficit-laden, dependent, and passive language in U.S. science education textbooks, challenging the dominant medicalized paradigm and exposing the exclusion of empowering, socially informed conceptions of disability. In education policy analysis, Klausen (2023) uses Fairclough's model to uncover dominant political discourses about digital skills within Norwegian policy texts. This study exposes how capitalist and neoliberal ideologies are covertly reproduced through seemingly neutral policy language.

Given the predominantly depoliticized perspectives in the existing literature on digital transformation in Vietnamese education, Fairclough's model provides a valuable framework for uncovering hidden ideologies, underlying motives, and political interests that have been largely overlooked in this context. Its comprehensive scope also makes it a stronger analytical choice than other CDA approaches, such as van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, which emphasizes cognitive processes, or Wodak's discourse-historical method, which centers on historical analysis. There also remains a significant absence of scholarship applying CDA, particularly Fairclough's model, to the Vietnamese context on this topic. Accordingly, this study is well justified in adopting Fairclough's framework for an in-depth examination of policy discourse. In the next chapter, I elaborate on the model and its specific application to Vietnamese digital transformation policy.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first discusses my methodological and philosophical positioning as a researcher, providing a transparent reflection of how my background and worldview may shape the research orientation and interpretation (Holmes, 2020). The second presents the main research questions, and the third specifies the policy selection and analytical methods used to address them.

Section 1: Methodological and Philosophical Positioning

1.1. Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the active, continuous process of critically examining and accounting for how a researcher's personal background and standpoint influences each stage of the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Although reflexivity has been critiqued for various reasons, such as the risk of self-indulgence, superficial application, the perceived never-ending nature of the process, and the fact that it is not a guarantee of research quality or complete self-awareness (Holmes, 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), I argue that its inclusion is crucial for this research. Reflexivity allows me, as a researcher, to engage in honest reflection on how my personal experiences, motivations, and awareness shape the research process, and to embrace the inherent subjectivity not as a limitation, but as a valuable asset.

I was born a daughter in a low-income family in a small town named Vinh in Vietnam, a place far less recognized than major cities like Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, or Da Nang. My upbringing was shaped by what I would describe as a traditionally conservative Vietnamese family, where both of my parents had lived through the Vietnam War. Their experiences during that time strongly influenced the way they raised me. In our household, and in the broader community around us, values such as financial security, gender hierarchy, and conformity to established social roles were deeply rooted. For example, there was a strong belief that every family should have a son, and daughters were often seen as secondary. Academic and professional success were not encouraged for girls, who were expected to be

more emotional, obedient, and less intellectually ambitious. It was commonly said that if a girl were too intelligent, it might be difficult for her to find a husband—an idea I often heard from relatives, neighbors, and people around me in my town.

These cultural and familial beliefs, combined with financial limitations, made educational opportunities feel almost unreachable. My family could neither afford to invest in my education nor, shaped by these norms, fully understand the value of doing so. My access to education abroad, especially studying abroad and at Oxford, was only possible through fully funded scholarships. Still, even as a young child, I had a strong sense that I did not belong within those expectations. I could not fully explain it then, but I felt a quiet resistance growing in me. In the Vietnamese context, education is often promoted as the main path to change one's life, especially for those from rural or disadvantaged backgrounds. For me, it became not just a practical path, but a deeply personal way to push against the limitations placed on me and to create space for something different.

Over time, I developed a strong desire to contribute to changes in Vietnamese education, particularly because I saw that many of the educators I encountered were simply reproducing the same social norms I had struggled against. My experiences studying abroad helped me better understand why this is the case. In Vietnam, where centralized authority and top-down policy mandates are the norm, teachers and school leaders often lack the autonomy not only to express alternative perspectives, but also to develop the mindset or confidence to think differently. The space for critical thought is narrow, and this makes it difficult for new ideas to take root, especially when they challenge established ideologies or traditions.

These personal and educational experiences shape the lens through which I approach my current research on CDA and the digital transformation of Vietnamese education. Studying at Oxford has given me more freedom to ask difficult questions and examine the hidden interests and power dynamics within policy discourses. My position is not grounded in political opposition, but in concern for how rigid and hierarchical systems can further marginalize people like me, who come from less privileged backgrounds. As digital technology becomes more integrated into education, I believe it is important to question the assumption that it is a neutral or purely technical solution. These technologies are shaped by

broader political, social, and economic forces that can reinforce inequality if left unexamined (Heeks, 2022). At the same time, I remain cautious of limitations within CDA itself, aware that critical work can become overly abstract, disconnected from real-world change, and confined to academic language (Zhang et al., 2011). For me, engaging critically is not just a theoretical exercise. I see it as part of a broader commitment to bringing alternative perspectives into conversations, especially within the Vietnamese context, not through political confrontation, but through reflection, dialogue, and the gradual reshaping of dominant narratives.

1.2. Critical Theory as a Research Paradigm

A research paradigm refers to "the philosophical assumptions or to the basic set of beliefs that guide the actions and define the worldview of the researcher" (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Following from the reflexive account of my positionality, I argue that specifying the research paradigm and its underlying assumptions completes the conceptualization of my philosophical positioning, as every stage of the research process, from the choice of methodology to the interpretation of findings, is shaped by the researcher's philosophical stance (Denzin et al., 2023). Conventionally, a research paradigm is described through four key dimensions: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Denzin et al., 2023). Although I still specify the research paradigm using these four conventional dimensions, it is important to acknowledge that there are longstanding debates over what constitutes a paradigm and how these four dimensions should be understood and applied, which makes this categorization subject to contestation (Freshwater & Cahill, 2013). At a more specific level, I do not approach particular philosophical orientations within these dimensions with the intent to fit them neatly into existing ideological camps. Throughout the analysis, I will specify which aspects of the paradigm I align with, and where I diverge, along with my reasoning.

This research is most closely associated with the critical theory paradigm, although it does not adhere to it rigidly. The critical theory paradigm, often referred to simply as Critical Theory, has its roots in the Frankfurt School in the early 20th century. Critical theory challenges traditional paradigms like positivism or interpretivism for failing to confront

deep-rooted power relations and systemic inequalities (Chow et al., 2022). Instead of aiming for ultimate neutrality or objectivity, critical theory focuses on questioning what is taken for granted and exposing the forces that marginalize particular groups or perspectives (Chow et al., 2022). Its philosophical foundations can be outlined in the following areas, drawing on Denzin et al. (2023) and Paradis et al. (2020):

Ontology (the nature of reality): historical realism, which sees reality as tangible and socially constructed through political, cultural, and historical contexts.

Epistemology (the nature of knowledge): subjectivism, meaning knowledge is subjective and value-laden, shaped by values, positionality, and relationships between the researcher and the researched.

Axiology (the role of values): explicit emphasis on justice, equity, and social transformation, especially for historically marginalized groups.

Methodology: typically qualitative, often using approaches like CDA, critical ethnography, and participatory action research to uncover how language, power structures, ideologies, and inequalities shape discourse, institutional practices, and lived experiences.

While my overarching goal of social transformation and axiological standpoint align most closely with critical theory, my ontological position is more consistent with ontological realism, which asserts that there is a transcendental reality existing independently of human knowledge and awareness (Zhang, 2023). While acknowledging that our access to this reality is mediated by language, history, culture, and positionality, I side with Keene (2023) in cautioning that historical realism risks “reducing historical knowledge (and realism) to nothing more than power” (p. 41), potentially eliminating what Morgenthau (1948, cited in Keene, 2023, p. 41) describes as a “transcendent point of view”, leading to the belief that there is no objective and impartial standard to judge historical events or assess power, thereby risking that historical knowledge and morality become merely extensions of existing power dynamics.

In this research, this stance allows for a critical engagement with knowledge production: My interpretations are shaped by my positionally and ideological commitments, yet I refuse to

collapse that reality entirely into subjective or discursive domains. It is important to my core values to be open to the unknown, the possibilities beyond my knowledge realm, and the human realm in general. In this sense, ontological realism aligns with my philosophical assumptions more than historical realism.

<u>Section 2:</u> Research Questions and Descriptions

In this research, I set out to answer three interrelated research questions. Together, these questions aim to provide a comprehensive picture of the policy discourse and socio-political dynamics shaping digital transformation in Vietnamese education. While each question can be primarily explored through one or two dimensions of Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, a full understanding of each requires engagement with all three analytical levels. The research questions are as follows:

1. **How do Vietnamese policies discursively construct the necessity of digital transformation in education?**

This question is primarily addressed through the first dimension of Fairclough's framework: *Textual Analysis* (also referred to as *Description*). By examining formal aspects and linguistic features of the policy texts, this question investigates how the digital transformation of education is constructed at the micro level. Although the focus is on textual analysis, this question is enriched by insights from the other two dimensions, which allow for a broader understanding of how issues are framed and which priorities are emphasized. Despite being largely descriptive, this question plays a foundational role in showing how language interacts with Vietnam's broader socio-political context.

2. **What ideological assumptions and economic imperatives shape its discursive construction?**

This question is primarily informed by the second and third dimensions of Fairclough's model: *Discursive Practice Analysis (Interpretation)* and *Sociocultural Practice Analysis (Explanation)*. It explores how social, institutional, and political forces influence the framing of digital transformation. This includes identifying underlying ideological assumptions and economic rationalities that shape the language used in policy documents. By situating

discourse within wider structures of power, this question allows a deeper understanding of the forces that inform national policy narratives.

3. **How do these policies interact with the broader societal context within Vietnam?**

This final question draws on all three analytical levels, examining whether the policy discourse reflects, reinforces, or challenges existing societal norms and ideologies. It looks beyond the governmental sphere and immediate texts to consider the resonance and effects of policy discourse within the wider Vietnamese context. By exploring how the state's discursive power intersects with broader social dynamics, this question offers insight into whether the ideologies promoted in official documents have the potential to shape public perception and practice. This perspective not only contributes to academic understanding but also provides a basis for future engagement in reform or activism, supporting an informed view of how non-state actors can navigate the policy landscape with political awareness.

Section 3: Policy Selection and Analytical Methods

3.1. Data Collection: Selection of Policy Documents

Phase 1: Initial Document Retrieval Using Keywords
I located relevant policies by searching official Vietnamese-language documents on the central government website (https://chinhphu.vn/). Starting with broad keyword searches helps capture documents comprehensively, with specificity applied later (Gusenbauer & Gauster, 2025). Because the platform does not support simultaneous entry of multiple keywords, I searched different keywords separately, including "Chuyển đổi số" (Digital transformation/Digitalization), "Giáo dục" (Education), and "Công nghệ thông tin" (Information Technology). Although browsing MOET's site would have been preferable for education-specific policy, I was unable to access it from my current residence outside Vietnam, making the central government website the best available alternative.

Using the central government website also allowed me to access not only policies issued directly by MOET but also those issued by other key governmental bodies that contain

substantial sections on digital transformation in education as part of broader agendas. This broader source base enables a more comprehensive understanding of how education fits within Vietnam's wider policy landscape.

At this stage, I retrieved and stored 116 documents for further screening.

Phase 2: Finalization Using Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria
To ensure a relevant and manageable corpus, I applied inclusion and exclusion criteria aligned with the research objectives (see **Table 1**). Setting such criteria is essential for consistency, validity, and the potential generalizability of findings (Velasco, 2010).

First, I skimmed through document titles and years of publication, excluding any issued before 2019. This cut-off year was chosen due to the structural shifts following the COVID-19 pandemic. In Vietnam's case, as the second fastest growing digital economy in Southeast Asia (Ha & Chuah, 2023), focusing on recent policies better captures the real-world dynamics of this transition.

Documents were further excluded if they were duplicates, non-policy formats such as news articles or brief announcements, or focused on unrelated topics. I then read through key sections of each remaining document, including "Quan điểm chỉ đạo" (Government's Standpoint), "Nhiệm vụ và Giải pháp" (Responsibilities and Solutions), and "Định hướng Chiến lược" (Strategic Orientation). I prioritized documents that either focus entirely on digital transformation in education or give it significant attention in these central sections. Through this process, sixteen qualified policy documents were finalized and selected for the main analysis.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Policy Document Selection

Categories	**Inclusion Criteria**	**Exclusion Criteria**
Topics Covered	Documents that explicitly address digital	Documents that address digital transformation

	transformation, digitalization, or technology integration in Vietnam's education sector (e.g., K-12, higher education, vocational training)	broadly without specific reference to education
Document Formats	Formal policy texts such as resolutions, decisions, dispatches, or circulars.	Non-policy materials such as speeches, short announcements, or implementation reports, unless part of official policy annexes
Issuance Timeframe	Documents issued between 2019 and 2025	Documents issued prior to 2019
Other Considerations	Unique documents with substantive relevance to the research topic	Duplicates or documents focused on unrelated topics

Phase 3: Language Translation

Given the language difference between the official policy documents (Vietnamese) and the required language of this research (English), translation plays a central role in ensuring both linguistic accuracy and the preservation of legal and policy-specific connotations. As a researcher, I acknowledge the limitations of translating all policy texts independently. These limitations stem from the considerable length of the documents (over 200 pages in total), time constraints, and the fact that policy translation is not my area of expertise, particularly when it comes to navigating technical terminology and legal phrasing in both languages.

To address this challenge, I relied on two sources for translation support.

Source 1 involved the use of English translations provided by LuatVietnam (https://english.luatvietnam.vn/), which is the first legal database in Vietnam to compile and offer official legal documents to the public. This platform has maintained a comprehensive collection of Vietnamese laws and policies since the country's independence in 1945 and is widely recognized as a credible legal source. Among the sixteen selected policy documents, eight have official English translations available on this database.

Source 2 consisted of English translations generated by a Large Language Model (LLM), specifically DeepL (https://www.deepl.com/en/translator). These translations were manually reviewed, verified, and adjusted by me as a native Vietnamese speaker. This process allowed me to access and interpret policy texts while preserving their original intent and meaning to the best extent possible. Eight of the sixteen selected documents were translated through this method, due to the limited availability of trustworthy English translations elsewhere. The use of LLMs in translation raises important ethical considerations, which are addressed in detail in the following section.

The full process of search, document selection, and translation is summarized in **Figure 1**. A complete list of the final policy documents is included in **Appendix 1**.

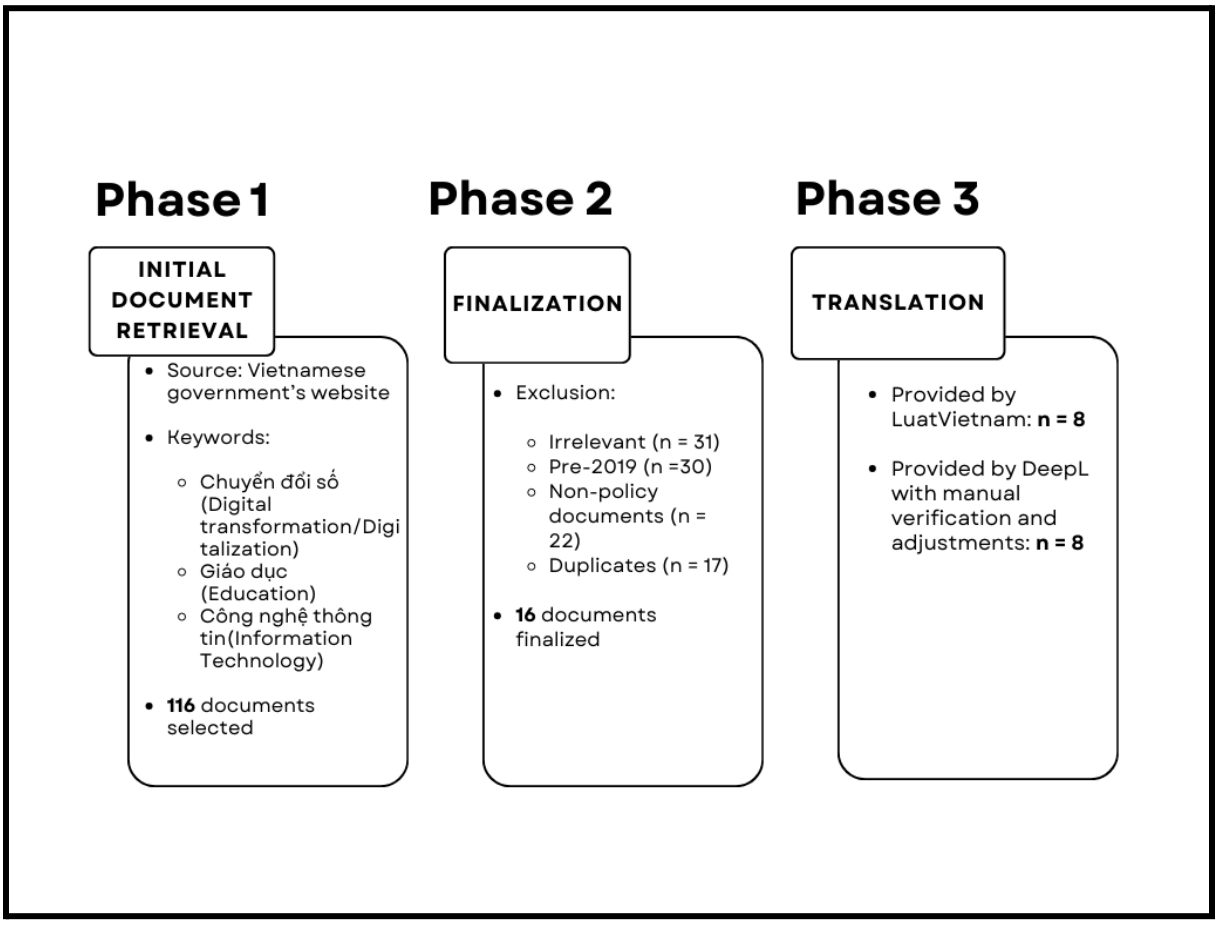


Figure 1: A complete process of policy selection.

3.2. Ethical Considerations in Using LLM for Translation

The use of DeepL to translate policy documents for further analysis carries both practical and ethical implications. On the practical side, it facilitated accessibility and efficiency when working with long, complex texts filled with legal and political terminology outside my domain of expertise. As the sole researcher, I faced clear limitations in translating these documents manually, particularly within the timeframe and scope of a master's thesis. The use of DeepL served primarily as a secondary support tool for translation, rather than intervening in the argumentation or analytical dimensions of this research. The original Vietnamese documents are also publicly available on government websites, which minimizes confidentiality concerns and allows for cross-checking by others if needed.

However, I recognize the risks involved in using an LLM developed outside Vietnam's sociopolitical and linguistic context. Misinterpretations may arise due to cultural or contextual nuances that automated translation tools cannot fully capture (Naveen & Trojovský, 2024). As a student of digital education, I am also aware of the opacity surrounding the algorithmic processes that shape LLM outputs (Baker & Hawn, 2022; van Giffen et al., 2022), and I do not possess the technical expertise to fully understand how these systems function. My limited familiarity with legal and bureaucratic English further constrained my ability to fully engage with the translation at a technical level.

Nevertheless, as a bilingual speaker of Vietnamese and English, I possess the capacity to evaluate the general accuracy of the translations. I engaged in manual review and cross-checked meanings to the best of my ability, drawing on multiple sources and revisiting the original Vietnamese texts where necessary to ensure that the sections used in the analysis were accurate and contextually appropriate.

3.3. Short Introduction to Selected Policy Documents' Types

The sixteen selected policy documents fall into six categories, issued by different authoritative agencies. Understanding their legal and social functions provides essential context for analysis. **Table 2** below offers an overview of each document type, including their issuing bodies and typical purposes (Vietnam's Legal Normative Documents, 2013; Vietnam Law and Legal Forum, 2015).

Table 2: A List of Selected Policy Documents' Types:

Document Type	Issuing Authority	Legal Status	Function & Use

Resolution	National Assembly, Government, Provincial People's Councils, Communist Party organs (e.g., Central Committee)	Legally binding (within scope)	Establishes major policies, strategies, or decisions on important matters. Often used to decide on budget allocations, national development plans, or socio-economic strategies. In Party contexts, resolutions set ideological or organizational directives.
Decision	Government, Prime Minister, Ministers, Provincial Chairpersons, Directors of Departments	Legally binding (enforceable by law)	Implement laws and resolutions by approving specific programs, appointing personnel, or directing state activities. For example, a decision may approve a national education reform plan or assign implementation responsibilities to ministries.
Circular	Ministers, Heads of Ministerial Agencies, Chief Justice, Chief Procurator	Legally binding (subordinate to laws/decrees)	Offers technical guidance or specific instructions for implementing higher-level legislation. Circulars clarify the application of laws or decisions, such as guidelines for university admission or procurement regulations. They ensure consistency in implementation across sectors.

Official Dispatch / Official Letter	Any government agency	Administrative Guide for Policy Implementation	Serves as a form of official communication to provide guidance, ask for information, request implementation, or clarify regulations. Dispatches help interpret or facilitate the application of official policies. Some are "instructional" (*công văn chỉ đạo*) while others are "responsive" (*công văn trả lời*).
Notice	Any public agency, organization, or authority	Informational	Announces outcomes, schedules, or decisions formalized through other policy documents, essential for transparency.

3.4. Analytical Methods

This sub-section outlines the core analytical components proposed by Fairclough for the three levels of analysis, highlights contributions from researchers who have adapted his model, and presents how these elements are applied in this research.

I adopt Fairclough's three-dimensional model (see **Figure 2**) as a comprehensive framework to uncover linguistic, socio-political, and ideological dimensions in Vietnamese digital transformation policies. Fairclough (2003; 2018) proposes a wide range of analytical elements that researchers can draw on, depending on the nature and objectives of their study.

At the **textual level (Description)**, Fairclough encourages both *form-and-meaning analysis* and detailed *linguistic & multimodal analysis*. The former includes interdiscursive analysis, which examines how different discourses, genres, and styles are combined. The latter

involves the examination of specific linguistic features such as grammar, semantics, lexicology, and pragmatics, which can be broken down further into components such as modality, mood, transitivity, and vocabulary. Fairclough (2003) categorizes these elements under three interrelated functions: *Representation* (how reality is linguistically constructed), *Action* (how language is used to perform or imply actions and interactions), and *Identity* (how roles, relationships, and positions are constructed through language). This categorization is adopted in the subsequent analysis in this research.

At the level of **discursive practice (Interpretation)**, Fairclough emphasizes the interaction between the textual dimension (Dimension 1) and the sociocultural dimension (Dimension 3). While this level draws on interdiscursive analysis, it also focuses on the processes through which texts are produced, distributed, and consumed or interpreted within particular contexts. In addition, this dimension can include an analysis of the sociocognitive aspects involved in the interpretation of discourse, particularly the mental and communicative processes that occur in real-time understanding.

Fairclough frames the third dimension, **sociocultural practice (Explanation)**, as inherently political. It involves examining how ideology operates and becomes "commonsensical" through the conventions of discourse situated within wider social and cultural structures. This level of analysis is particularly concerned with the relationship between discourse and social transformation, including processes such as emergence, recontextualization, and operationalization of ideas within institutional and societal frameworks.

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright.

The figure was sourced at Fairclough, N. (2018). Critical discourse analysis : the critical study of language (Second edition.). Routledge.

Importantly, Fairclough's "dialectical-relational approach" (2003) emphasizes that the elements selected for analysis at each level are "always provisional and open to change" (p.15). Rather than prescribing a fixed analytical checklist, Fairclough encourages researchers to adapt the framework to the needs and contexts of their specific studies. This openness has allowed subsequent researchers to innovate upon and extend the original model. For instance, some have incorporated genealogical discourse analysis to trace the historical development of discourse (Cummings et al., 2020), while others have categorized intertextuality based on implication and sentiment (Lu & Zhou, 2024), or integrated visual elements alongside textual analysis (Aji et al., 2019).

Following a careful review of the sixteen selected policy documents and Fairclough's model, this research draws primarily on the core components proposed in his framework, while integrating selected analytical strategies developed by subsequent researchers where relevant. These adaptations are identified and explained in the next chapter (see **Figure 3**).

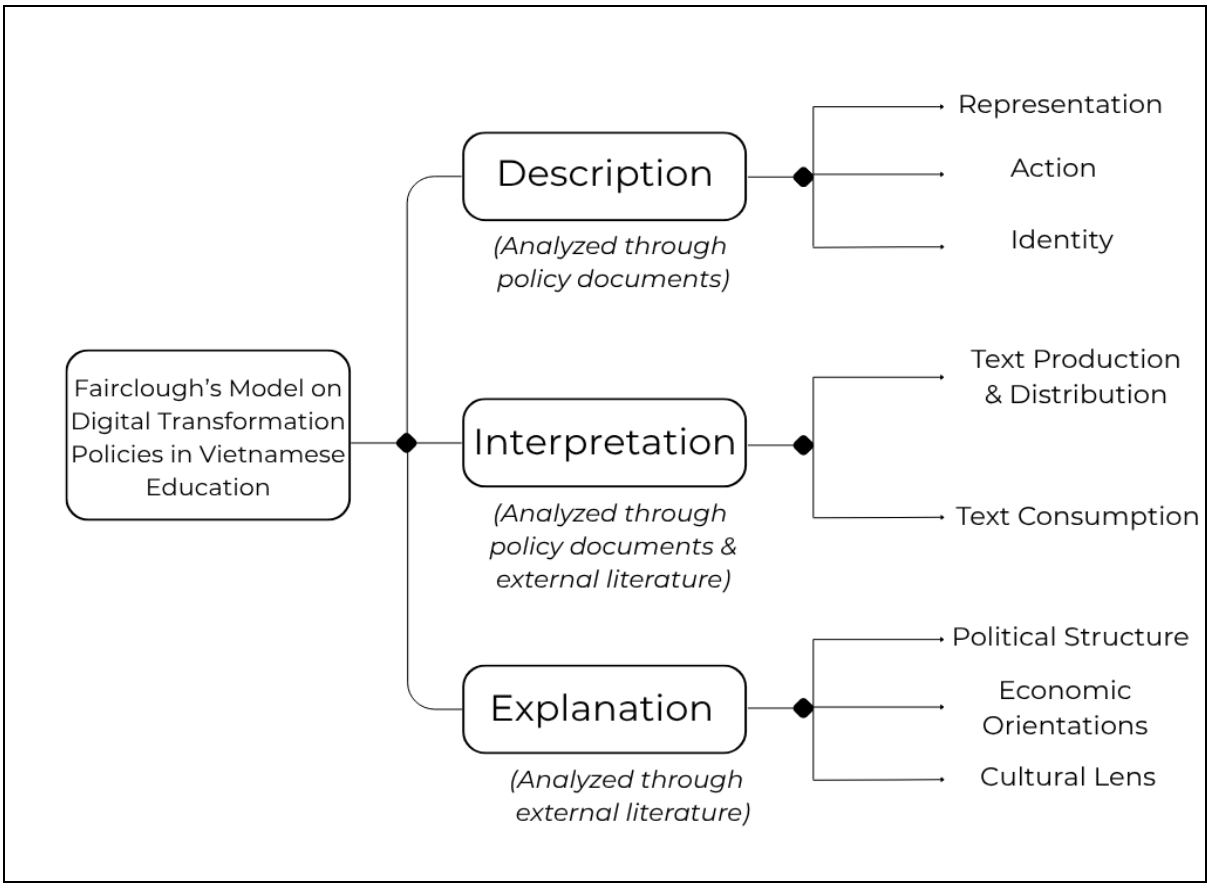


Figure 3: Diagram of Fairclough's Model applied in this research

To support the analysis, I adopt a corpus-assisted approach using AntConc software for concordance analysis, frequency counts, and keyword identification. These tools help identify patterns in the linguistic features of a large corpus that may not be easily detected through manual analysis, providing a foundation for both textual and ideological investigation. At the same time, I carried out manual calculations and close reading where nuanced judgement was required, for example in the modality classification presented in Chapter 3, **Table 4**.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began by establishing my philosophical and methodological positioning, including a reflexive account of my background and a reflection on the research paradigm and its underlying assumptions. I then introduced three interrelated research questions,

followed by the process of selecting policy documents. This process started with initial keyword searches, continued with finalization through inclusion and exclusion criteria, and concluded with the translation of sixteen selected documents using LuatVietnam official translations and DeepL-assisted translations. The use of LLMs for translation was approached with ethical considerations drawn from academic literature, complemented by my own manual checks as a bilingual researcher to minimize risks to the accuracy of subsequent textual analysis. Fairclough's model serves as the main analytical framework, supported by the corpus-assisted software AntConc, with three integrated models synthesizing insights from both within-text and beyond-text levels. Limitations are discussed in the final section of Chapter 4, Discussion, following a consideration of all methodological and analytical elements as well as the overall findings. In the next chapter, I present the findings derived from these models and discuss how these findings address the research questions.

Chapter 3: Findings

This chapter is divided into two main sections: *Three Dimensions of Analysis Results* and *Responses to Research Questions*. The first presents broader results derived from the three levels of analysis based on Fairclough's model, while the second synthesizes them into more precise and targeted insights. This structure allows the research questions to be addressed in greater depth after the three layers of analysis have been considered.

Section 1: Three Dimensions of Analysis Results

1.1. Textual Analysis (Description)

As discussed in Chapter 2, this level of analysis examines the policy corpus through three key aspects: *Representation, Action,* and *Identity.* It serves as the micro-level of analysis, primarily focusing on textual features while still connecting with wider discursive and sociocultural practices.

a. Representation

Representation explores how policies linguistically construct the reality of digital transformation in education, looking at how reality is framed from particular perspectives and what imagined futures are being promoted. In this research, representation is captured through *lexical choices* that reflect techno-optimism and a sense of urgency, along with a strong use of *declaratives* that frame digital transformation as a state-driven inevitability.

Lexical Choices

Lexical choices are the building blocks of a text and play a central role in shaping how reality is constructed from the authors' viewpoints. Words carry "experiential, relational, and expressive values" (Kred & Rabab'ah, 2024, p.1), allowing writers or speakers to convey certain ideologies through what Khafaga (2023, p.1) calls "strategic lexicalization" — the deliberate use of particular terms to signal specific meanings. For instance, while words like protest, riot, and demonstration overlap in meaning, they differ in connotation. Kotorova (2024) also emphasizes that lexical selection can bring some elements of reality into focus while obscuring others.

(1) Techno-Optimistism Terminologies

As reviewed in the literature, technological optimism refers to the belief that technology inherently leads to social and economic progress (Bishop et al., 2020; Tuomi, 2018). This view is prominent in the tech industry and strongly reflected in these policy documents. Across the corpus, digital technologies are consistently portrayed as enablers of growth and public good. For instance, Decision 411 (The Prime Minister, 2022) begins by stating *"The current reality brings about an opportunity that Vietnam needs to quickly seize [...] to develop digital economy and digital society"* (p.2). This perspective runs throughout the texts and is supported by economically loaded terminologies often associated with neoliberal policy frameworks, such as *efficiency, innovation, development, and competitiveness*. In contrast, expressions that reflect critical or cautionary perspectives on technology are noticeably fewer in both frequency and emphasis (see **Table 3**).

Table 3: Lexical Framing of Techno-Optimistic and Counter Discourses

Categories	Stem Words	Frequency	Weighed Percentage (%)
Techno-Optimistic Logics	Development	1001	2.01
	Economy	201	0.4
	Innovative	182	0.36
	Connectivity	157	0.31
	Efficiency	56	0.11
Counter Logics	Security	174	0.35
	Rights	34	0.07
	Care	21	0.04

	Safety	18	0.04
	Transparency	13	0.03

These five words in each category ranked highest in my analysis, and I also observe them as recurring terms in wider techno-optimistic and counter-logic discussions. The lexical analysis shows a notable imbalance, with techno-optimistic terms appearing far more often; "development" alone occurs 1,001 times (2.01%), greatly exceeding the top counter-logic term "security" at 174 times (0.35%), and the total weighted percentage of techno-optimistic terms (3.19%) is over three times that of counter-logic terms (0.53%). Even if context-free word frequency alone does not provide a complete picture (Lu & Zhou, 2024), this imbalance points to techno-optimistic leaning in the corpus.

A close reading of official standpoints and strategic directives also suggests a strong alignment with the belief that digital technologies are inherently beneficial, reinforcing the techno-optimistic stance. Circular 30 (MOET, 2023), for instance, dedicates a lengthy chapter to minimum mandates for IT application in educational institutions, encompassing a wide range of requirements. These include comprehensive online training software systems that support both synchronous and asynchronous learning; integrated systems for digital content management and the use of MOOCs; specific responsibilities for teachers in managing and interacting in online learning environments; and the assurance of stable access for both learners and educators through reliable Internet connections and sufficient physical equipment. These requirements are informed by many explicitly stated authoritative viewpoints, such as:

"Digital technologies have been applied in industry [...] thus ***creating*** *numerous job* ***opportunities****, income and utilities, and* ***improving*** *the* ***living standards*** *of the people"* (Resolution 52, The Central Committee, 2019, p.1).

These texts collectively portray digital transformation as beneficial to national progress, positioning education as a means to achieve this imagined future: a future filled with opportunity, but only if decisive digital action is taken.

(2) Language of Urgency and Inevitability

Building on the urgency framing introduced in Chapter 1, where techno-optimism positions technology as a necessity for revolution, the policies here adopt similar lexical choices, especially in relation to Vietnam's role in the 4IR, an era where advanced technologies like AI, IoT, and automation increasingly merge with daily life, reshaping work, society, and urban systems through intelligent, interconnected, and autonomous infrastructures (Ross & Maynard, 2021). Some examples include:

"*Active participation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution is an **indispensable** requirement and an **urgent** and long-term particularly important strategic task of both the political system and the entire society*" (Resolution 52, The Central Committee, 2019, p.2).

"*Continue to improve the institutional framework [....] **urgently** develop a plan to train high-quality human resources to meet the requirements of scientific and technological development*" (Notice 171, Office of the Government, 2025, p.2).

This lexicon frames digital transformation as not only a critical national priority but also an obligatory task, leaving the country no choice but to pursue it. This particular framing legitimizes the contrast with the current reality, in which *"the activeness of the participation in the Fourth Industrial Revolution of our country remains low"* (Resolution 52, The Central Committee, 2019, p.2). Logically followed, it simultaneously legitimizes the use of education as a means to train a workforce for digital competency and to spread market-oriented logic, without opening space for alternative imaginaries. For instance, according to Decision 749 (CPV, 2020), foundational tasks include *"to change awareness about the vision, necessity and urgency of digital transformation among the population"* (p.6), through a variety of strategies such as the *"provision of massive open online courses (MOOCs)"* (p.14) and the adoption of *"the Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics (STEAM)*

education model and train English and skills of use of information technology" (p.15). Overall, the use of a language of urgency and inevitability constructs a picture of a country portrayed as falling behind, where digital transformation has not yet reached a level that enhances people's well-being or sufficiently supports educational and economic growth. At the same time, it paints a visionary future of market dominance and technological advancement that is only attainable through prompt and decisive action. These perspectives align with the portrayal of technology as a positive force for an education revolution that should not be hindered by low awareness and lack of resources in the techno-optimistic framework (Nemorin et al., 2023; Timotheou et al., 2023).

Grammatical Level: Declaratives and the Framing of Socialist Control

Declaratives, structured around the Subject-Verb-Object pattern, are common in both English and Vietnamese writing. In policy texts, however, they serve more than a descriptive function. Pragmatically, they present propositions that readers are expected to accept, regardless of their factual status (Wilson & Sperber, 2012). Within the framework of CDA, declaratives in state discourses often function to assert strategic objectives as neutral facts, thereby naturalizing policy goals as common sense (Nursanti, 2022).

In this corpus, declaratives are frequently used to reinforce a vision of digital transformation as centrally managed and state-driven. Consider the statement from Decision 942 (The Prime Minister, 2021, p.6):

"*Digital universities are small-scale digital nations*"

This is not simply an informative sentence but a prescriptive articulation of what universities are expected to become in the national digital transformation effort. As the country undergoes structural changes in how services, governance, and education are digitalized, universities are positioned to reform across multiple aspects (Luu et al., 2025). These institutions are framed as microcosms of a larger digital society, expected to operate with tech-integrated systems that mirror the state's digital aspirations (Luu et al., 2025).

Other declaratives in the corpus make ambitious claims about Vietnam's global positioning, such as striving to be in the top 30 for e-Government and top 5 in AI within ASEAN. These are not presented as aspirational goals open for debate, but as concrete objectives the country must reach. The repeated use of declaratives naturalizes these outcomes as necessary, reinforcing a linear vision of progress in which there is little room for alternative pathways.

Roles and responsibilities are likewise assigned in unequivocal terms. The state is consistently positioned at the center of action and oversight:

"[...] ***state agencies*** *play a* ***leading*** *role, employers play a key role, and employees and people actively participate in collecting, standardizing and opening data"* (Decision 411, The Prime Minister, 2022, p.18).

Or

"The Party Central Committee's Economic Commission shall assume the ***prime*** *responsibility for regularly monitoring, supervising, inspecting and urging the implementation of the Resolution"* (Resolution 52, The Central Committee, 2019, p.10).

Together with the construction of techno-optimism and urgency, the pervasive use of declaratives about how education is understood, who the decision-makers are, and what it should become, paints a picture of a normative reality shaped by an authoritative viewpoint. In this picture, education is positioned as a means to achieve global competitiveness through digital transformation. This transformation is presented as inevitable, expected to be implemented across all dimensions of education, and directed toward a future that seeks competitiveness through neoliberal logic while remaining under socialist control. Through textual analysis of representation, the first signs of a digitally transformed education landscape begin to emerge, marked by a techno-optimistic vision whose goals are aligned with neoliberal market imperatives, yet still embedded within the framework of strong socialist governance.

b. Action

Action focuses on how policy discourses contribute to the construction of processes, activities, and obligations necessary for the digital transformation process, defining what tasks need to be done, to whom, and the social relations between them. The elements analyzed under "Representation", especially the language of urgency and inevitability, remain relevant here, as they emphasize the necessity for immediate action in digitalizing the education system according to the state's agenda. However, a fuller picture of what actions are required and how power is exercised to legitimize this urgency requires an additional layer of analysis. This involves examining how action is constructed through textual features such as *modality, imperatives, and genre.*

Modality

Modality is a grammatical and semantic system that allows authors to express their stance toward propositions, including degrees of certainty, obligation, or probability (Fairclough, 2003). Analyzing modality helps uncover how speakers or writers commit to declared actions and assert authority (Fairclough, 2003). Empirical studies have shown that deontic modals (e.g., must, have to) are often used to impose obligations and drive specific actions, while epistemic modals (e.g., will, may) are used to present predictions, possibilities, or cautious expectations (Makhloufi, 2025).

In this analysis, I combine Halliday's structuralist-functionalist approach to modality and Lu and Zhou's (2024) modality framework, categorizing modality into four main types: Obligation, Inclination, Usuality, and Probability. Each is further divided into three levels of commitment (high-value, medium-value, low-value) (see **Table 4**). This categorization reveals the degree to which rules and tasks for digital transformation are imposed on responsible actors.

Table 4: Modality

Categories	High-value	Medium-value	Low-value	Frequency
Obligation	Must (33)	Should (15)	Can (21)	376

	Need to (66)	Shall (230)	May (10) Allowed (1)	
Inclination	/	/	Will (109)	109
Usuality	Always (1)	/	/	1
Probability	/	/	May (8) Can (9) Possible (4)	21
Total	100	245	162	507

Obligation modals dominate (74%, 376 out of 507 instances), with passive constructions signaling inevitability in digital transformation mandates, obscuring agency. Although modality analysis has limitations, as some modal verbs serve multiple functions and certain expressions (e.g., semi-modals) perform similar roles, the skewed distribution toward obligation modals frames digital transformation as non-negotiable, as evidenced by:

*"This is recognized as a profound and comprehensive revolution across all fields; it **must** be implemented decisively, persistently, comprehensively, consistently, and sustainably with breakthrough, revolutionary solutions"* (Resolution 57, The Central Committee, 2024, p.2).

Constructions like this prevail throughout the text, reinforcing a sense of urgency and inevitably of digital transformation mentioned in the lexical analysis, one more time placing a priority for digital transformation following the state-led market logic.

Imperatives

Imperative constructions, which direct or command receivers to act, typically without an expressed subject, play a key role in enacting authority and mobilizing behavior. Unlike declaratives, imperatives directly assert agency and obligation (Fairclough, 2003).

In this policy corpus, imperatives are especially common in official Decisions, where extensive strategic guidelines are outlined through commanding language. Within the education sector, imperatives related to digital transformation span a wide range of areas, signifying a dense network of non-negotiable requirements. For instance:

*"**Promote** the implementation of solutions for digital libraries and shared digital learning resource repositories [.....]*
***Enhance** the application of innovative technology in examination processes (developing standardized question banks; systems and procedures for computer-based testing and assessment, etc.) [...]*
***Intensify** communication efforts regarding the role and outcomes of IT application in training and management activities at higher education institutions. Build a digital culture within higher education institutions"* (Dispatch 4966, MOET, 2019, p.2-5).

The imperative verbs here target multiple dimensions of digital transformation, including information storage, knowledge exchange, assessment processes, and institutional culture. This aligns with the inevitability lexicon analyzed in the Representation subsection, extending it into performative directives. The scope is not limited to specific domains but extends to the restructuring of all educational aspects, indicating a wholesale educational revolution.

Genre

Genre refers to the specific ways people act and interact linguistically (Fairclough, 2003). This aspect is essential in understanding how discourse shapes social action, as different genres carry different interactional and communicative logics (Fairclough, 2003). An interview, for example, differs discursively from a report. Policy documents function as

"genres of governance" (Fairclough, 2003, p.43), aiming to regulate, legitimize, and structure particular actions.

The documents in this corpus reflect core characteristics of this governance genre, as they establish mandates and frameworks backed by the authority of the Vietnamese state. For instance, Circular 30 (MOET, 2023) explicitly *"prescribes information technology application in online training",* marking a non-negotiable requirement for institutions. Combined with frequent use of imperatives and declaratives, this genre produces an authoritative text that carries enforceable expectations.

However, these policies also incorporate elements of a "hortatory report", which Fairclough (2003, p.106) describes as the representation of information in a way that appears purely descriptive but actually carries "a covert prescriptive intent", aiming to persuade readers to normalize and accept certain perspectives. These policies list a wide range of requirements, tasks, and desired development goals, such as the aim to gain advantage in the 4IR mentioned earlier, or the target "*to bring Vietnam into the top 5 countries in the ASEAN region and top 60 countries in the world regarding AI research, development and application*" (Decision 127, The Prime Minister, 2021, p.2). These statements are presented as declarative facts of what is and what will be, yet they lack explanation as to why such rankings and goals should be prioritised over other concerns.

This aligns with the "mythopoesis" strategy of legitimation, which constructs a persuasive national image by appealing to assumed normative values and promising positive outcomes, leaving little or no room for alternative narratives (Fairclough, 2003, p.109). The values underlying these statements include efficiency, competitiveness, and innovation. The boundaries between factual claims, value-based judgments, and predictions become blurred in the process of making these ideologies appear natural and necessary.

The analysis of Action in the texts reveals how techno-optimistic and neoliberal ideas are reinforced through imperatives that call for the comprehensive transformation of the education system and the frequent use of obligation modality. Genre also plays a central role in consolidating state power: legal documents function as a genre of governance, positioning

the state's viewpoints as authoritative and equating them with normative values through elements that mimic factual reporting.

c. Identity

The final layer in this textual analysis, identity, refers to the construction of roles and agencies of social actors through language. It explores how individuals, groups, and institutions are positioned in relation to one another, contributing to a broader understanding of power dynamics and ideological structures in society (Fairclough, 2003). In this analysis, identity is examined through *transitivity*, *intertextuality*, and *pronoun usage*.

Transitivity and the Construction of Agency and Passivity

Transitivity is a grammatical system that represents processes and participants in clauses. In simpler terms, it refers to who does what to whom, and how events, relationships, and states are represented. It significantly shapes perceptions of agency, causality, and accountability in discourse (Fairclough, 2003). Active constructions with clear agents tend to possess power, authority, and control, while passive forms often obscure who is responsible for an action.

In these policies, the government and its affiliated agencies, particularly MOET, are consistently portrayed as proactive, forward-looking agents within material processes such as *developing, approving, and promulgating* digital transformation in education (MOET, 2023; The Prime Minister, 2021). Similarly, educational institutions, leaders, and principals are often framed as responsible actors tasked with *formulating, organizing, and investing* in accordance with state-mandated digital education initiatives (MOET, 2023; The Central Committee, 2024). In contrast, students and the wider public are constructed as affected participants or beneficiaries of these transformations. For instance, they are described as *having better quality services*, or *being required to declare data* (MOET, 2023; The Prime Minister, 2021). They are also depicted as targets of change, referring to individuals whose awareness, skills, and mindsets need to be shaped in order to contribute meaningfully to the broader digital transformation agenda (MOET, 2023; The Prime Minister, 2021).

This distribution of agency reflects a normative technocratic perspective in which the state and technologically skilled actors (such as AI scientists, STEM researchers, and digital

professionals) are positioned as more advanced and thus entitled to lead (Cozzolino et al., 2024). Meanwhile, students, especially those with limited digital proficiency, are seen as at risk of being left behind and are therefore compelled to adapt in order to thrive within an inevitable and fast-changing digital environment that is portrayed as inherently beneficial.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality refers to "the presence of actual elements of other texts within a text" (Fairclough, 2003, p.49). This can take the form of direct quotations, borrowed phrases, or embedded references to other voices and discourses. Through intertextuality, a text may reveal whose perspectives are approved and incorporated, and whose perspectives are left out (Fairclough, 2003).

One clear feature of intertextuality in this corpus is internal cross-referencing, where policy documents cite previous regulations and decisions, thus creating a continuous body of shared discourse. Most texts begin with phrases like "Pursuant to [...]" or "Implementing [...]", followed by the citation of at least two foundational documents. For example, Decision 4966 by MOET (2019, p.1) cites a wide array of prior policies such as Resolution 17 (CPV, 2017) on e-Governance and Decision 117 (The Prime Minister, 2017) on IT management in teaching and learning. These references create a cohesive policy narrative with aligned goals, including numerical performance targets and common problem framings, reinforcing ideological consistency and ensuring that socialist state control is maintained across all ministries, including education.

Another form of intertextuality is the implicit borrowing from global discourse. Terms such as MOOCs and STEM/STEAM are kept in English in the original Vietnamese texts, suggesting an uncritical alignment with international trends rather than localized initiatives. Similarly, references to global indicators like Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), E-Government Development Index (EGDI), and Global Innovation Index (GII), or to targets such as becoming a top 5 AI Country in ASEAN (MOET, 2023; The Prime Minister, 2021, 2022, 2025) reveal an orientation toward global neoliberal discourses that emphasize competitiveness, innovation, and performance metrics. This intertextual layering reinforces a

techno-optimistic, corporate discourse of economic modernization, and simultaneously affirm state-led control in implementation.

Pronoun Usage

Pronoun usage refers to the strategic use of personal pronouns in order to shape relationships and convey the author's perspective. In a discourse analysis of a Chinese leader's speech, Lu and Zhou (2024) observe the frequent use of the inclusive "we-group" pronoun as a diplomatic strategy to assert China's independent agency while simultaneously appealing for cooperation from the United States as a collective "group".

Throughout all policies in this corpus, third-person references are consistently used when referring to government bodies—for example, "The Prime Minister," "The Politburo," and "The Government"—across titles, headings, subheadings, and within the body text. This usage constructs a formal, institutional, and objective identity for the state apparatus, reinforcing an authoritative tone directed at the information recipients. Although the documents emphasize national goals and socialism, no inclusive pronouns such as "we" are used. This absence reinforces a top-down relationship and underscores the hierarchy between the ruling authorities and the governed.

d. Conclusion to Textual Analysis

The textual analysis reveals a discursive landscape in which digital transformation is framed as a national imperative guided by the state's authority, techno-optimism, and a neoliberal orientation towards competition and innovation. Through the use of modality, imperatives, and interdiscursive blending, policies construct a sense of urgency and inevitability (see **Table 5**). They communicate not only what is but also what should be, leaving no room for contestation or alternative visions. State actors are depicted as planners, schools as implementers, while students and the public are positioned as those who must adapt.

Table 5: Textual Analysis Summary

Category	Element of Analysis	Framing of Digital Transformation

Representation	Lexical Choices: Techno-Optimism Terminologies	Inherently Progressive
	Lexical Choices: Language of Urgency and Inevitability	Urgent, non-negotiable
	Grammar: Declaratives	Factual Status
Action	Modality	Reinforcing urgency
	Imperatives	All-encompassing, a wholesale education revolution
	Genre	Genre-mixing: • Governance: legitimizing the logic of progressiveness and urgency through power • "Hortatory Report": constructing norms as facts
Identity	Transitivity	Role portrayal: • Government and authoritative bodies: proactive and forward-looking agents • Educational institutions and their leaders: Implementers • Students and the wider public: Beneficiaries, Targets of Change
	Intertextuality	• Internal referencing for ideological

	consistency • Implicit borrowing from global discourse for global competition encouragement
Pronoun Usage	Third-person references, reinforcing a top-down hierarchy

Yet, textual features alone do not fully explain how such discourse gains legitimacy, spreads across institutional settings, or influences practice due to its limitations within textual scope. For that reason, the next chapter turns to the level of discursive practice, which examines how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed in Vietnam. This next layer allows a deeper understanding of the institutional and ideological mechanisms that underpin the textual patterns described above.

1.2. Discursive Practice Analysis (Interpretation)

This step serves as the meso-level of analysis, bridging the micro-level linguistic analysis and the macro-level sociocultural interpretation of the text. It examines how policy texts are produced and distributed and how they are consumed (Fairclough, 2003). Insights on production, distribution, and consumption are drawn from the selected policy corpus and from the wider literature.

a. Production and Distribution

Examining how texts are produced and distributed reveals power relations within policymaking and broader social structures, and shows how particular ideologies become normalized through discourse (Fairclough, 2003).

In Vietnam, digital transformation policies in education are produced centrally by authoritative bodies such as the Central Committee, the CPV, the Prime Minister, and MOET.

These texts are drafted and issued within state institutions without formal mechanisms for external review, feedback, or public consultation, a pattern confirmed by both literature (London & Duong, 2023; Long et al., 2018) and the policy corpus (The Prime Minister, 2020; 2022).

Although the focus of education policy has shifted over time from intellectual elitism toward economic growth and human capital, the production process has remained closed (London & Duong, 2023). Policymaking continues to be led by top-level actors without public consultation or meaningful participation from schools, educators, or independent experts (Long et al., 2018; London & Duong, 2023). Policies such as Decision 749 (The Prime Minister, 2020) and Decision 131 (The Prime Minister, 2022) explicitly state that educational reforms are conceived, inspected, and supervised solely within these authoritative bodies, without provisions for consultation beyond government channels. Although there have been longstanding calls for more inclusive processes, such participation remains limited (Long et al., 2018).

Policy distribution follows a similarly centralized pattern. Documents flow from top-level authorities to ministries and then down to schools, with teachers, students, and staff at the bottom of the chain. This hierarchy is reflected in the concluding sections of most policy texts. For example, Decision 749 devotes seven pages to specifying which actors must implement particular clauses, including MOET's obligations to design tasks in accordance with overarching state guidelines. Similarly, MOET documents pass responsibilities to subordinate institutions; Dispatch 4966 (MOET, 2019) concludes with:

"The Ministry of Education and Training requires the heads of higher education institutions to strictly implement the guidelines in this document and report to the Ministry of Education and Training when requested […]" (p.5).

In short, the system operates through a tightly coordinated, top-down chain: policies originate from central authorities, are delegated to MOET, and are disseminated to smaller units and institutions to ensure uniform implementation and alignment with state priorities.

b. Consumption

If the analysis of production and distribution reveals the perspectives of ruling bodies in a tightly controlled political system, the analysis of consumption investigates how the intended recipients and subjects interpret or respond to the policies (Fairclough, 2003).

The first step is to identify who the consumers of these policies are. As discussed, the distribution of policies follows a hierarchical path: from top-level agencies down to less powerful actors. These policies are no exception; they may pass through a lengthy distribution chain, yet their final recipients are diverse education stakeholders, including Vietnamese educational institutions (K-12, higher education, vocational schools, research institutes), educators, students, and private-sector actors. These stakeholders are generally expected to comply with the policies without space for individual or institutional negotiation unless authorized by higher-level authorities (Nguyen et al., 2020).

How these actors perceive and interpret the directives within these policies is seldom publicly discussed in reports or academic literature, making evidence-based conclusions difficult. This scarcity likely stems from the political sensitivities surrounding the topic in Vietnam. This analysis thus relies on a limited number of recent studies exploring teachers' perceptions of digital transformation in education, which provide some relevant insights. For instance, O'Connor et al. (2023) surveyed Vietnamese educators about the adoption of digital technologies during and after the pandemic, revealing mixed responses. Some viewed digital transformation positively as an opportunity to develop new skills, increase student engagement, and embrace new teaching tools, while others struggled with the rapid technological changes and the lack of prior training, expressing anxiety about adapting to new demands (O'Connor et al., 2023). From the schools' perspective, public pushback is limited. Rare concerns have been raised about inadequate financial resources, with most funding coming from parental contributions, making it difficult for rural schools especially to meet strategic goals of digital transformation (London & Duong, 2023).

Despite these challenges, there is little recorded opposition directly confronting policy discourses or the ideological assumptions underlying digital transformation. This suggests either broad acceptance among schools and educators of the government's position on digital

transformation's necessity, or more likely, a lack of political space to express dissent. Exploring this dynamic requires a deeper sociocultural analysis, which is the final dimension of the Fairclough framework. The next section turns to that dimension, where I examine not only the political dynamics but also the significant cultural and spiritual elements missing from the selected policy corpus; these elements are important for addressing the third research question concerning the interaction between policy discourse and the wider societal context.

1.3. Sociocultural Practice Analysis (Explanation)

While the first dimension primarily touches upon linguistic aspects, and the second combines linguistic and social analysis, this last dimension represents a macro-level analysis that moves beyond the immediate text and its production or consumption to investigate the broader context in which discourse operates (Fairclough, 2003). This section thus draws on literature about the sociocultural dynamics that shape Vietnam's education landscape to assess how policy discourse interacts with the wider context.

Vietnam's socio-cultural landscape is a complex interplay of historical legacies, ideological frameworks, cultural-spiritual influences, and evolving global forces. Specifically, the persistent ideology of familialism, which is deeply rooted in Confucianism and Buddhism that profoundly shapes daily life and state policies, engages in a complex dialogic process with the powerful communist party-state (historically influenced by Marxism but also evolving economically) and the pervasive global neoliberal ideology (Luong, 2023; Tran & Williams, 2024). These elements together shape a multifaceted context in which policymakers, educators, and the public must navigate the discourses of the past, present, and anticipated future in the digital era. While economic and political systems have been consistently discussed in this research, the cultural and spiritual lens, particularly the Confucian and Buddhist influences in educational philosophy, remains underrepresented in Vietnamese digital education research and policymaking. This section first discusses political and economic influences, then dedicates more space to spiritual and cultural philosophy.

a. Political and Economic Structures

Politically, the influence of Vietnam's one-party socialist state is central to the legal, social, and educational landscape. This governance model is rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology, which emphasizes state-led development and collective welfare, and remains relevant today (Loi, 2022). Although international discourses often critique such a model for its lack of democratic values and limited freedom of speech, it has also fostered a collective national psyche that many Vietnamese credit with helping the country resist and overcome stronger military powers, including during the war with the United States (Clemis, 2025). However, this system's heavy reliance on the ethics and leadership of its authorities makes the country vulnerable to political patronage, corruption, power abuse, and human rights suppression (Le, 2023). Indeed, although Vietnam is not a purely authoritarian regime and shows some tolerance for certain political acts, dissent against policy mandates from authoritative bodies can invite harsh state reactions, making public challenges risky (Anh-Susann, 2022).

Economically, Vietnam has embraced state-led neoliberalism, also described as state capitalism with socialist characteristics (Lê, 2023). This model allows the state to maintain centralized control while selectively adopting market principles, particularly in sectors seen as engines of economic development (Nguyen & Hong, 2025). Education is one such sector, where policy discourses increasingly frame digital transformation as a means to enhance economic competitiveness, growth, and efficiency, shown through the textual analysis above. However, education in Vietnam remains one of the most tightly governed domains, not only due to its strategic economic role but also because it serves as a tool for ideological reproduction (London & Duong, 2023). Discussions about the goals and purposes of education are often politically sensitive, as they can reveal underlying tensions between the state's centralized authority, market-driven aspirations, and its official socialist orientation (Ha, 2025). While policies outwardly present education as a pathway to national development and social equality, they also reflect deeper ideological contradictions embedded within Vietnam's political-economic structure.

b. Cultural and Spiritual Influences

While economic and political factors are often emphasized, the cultural values deeply rooted in Confucianism and the growing influence of Buddhism in educational philosophy remain largely absent from policies. Vietnam's educational values have been profoundly shaped by historical legacies in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—often collectively referred to as the "Three-Religion" spirit (Tran & Williams, 2024). Among them, Taoism has significantly declined in influence, while Confucianism persists and Buddhism appears to be on the rise (Tran & Williams, 2024). Confucianism and Buddhism have left a complex legacy on the country's educational values, practices, and challenges (Tran & Williams, 2024).

Throughout Vietnamese history, Confucianism has played a foundational role, especially during the Lý and Trần[2] dynasties, when it was established as the core philosophy for both political leadership and the education of mandarins (Tran et al., 2023). One of its key contributions was fostering a profound "fondness of learning" and a spirit of social contribution among the Vietnamese community, nurturing collective strength and responsibility (MacKinnon & Hao, 2016, p.150). This legacy remains visible today, as teachers continue to be held in high esteem, traditionally positioned just beneath the King, and are celebrated nationally (MacKinnon & Hao, 2016). Confucianism's emphasis on moral instruction is also present in current Vietnamese schooling, which promotes values such as kindness, justice, wisdom, and honesty (MacKinnon & Hao, 2016; Tran et al., 2023). The phrase "Tiên học lễ, hậu học văn" (Placing moral learning before academic achievements) remains a well-known educational motto, and moral education is still formally taught and assessed (MacKinnon & Hao, 2016; Tran et al., 2023). Furthermore, Confucian thought, particularly the idea that education does not differentiate between social classes, laid the groundwork for inclusive educational ideals (Vu, 2022). Although the application of Confucian values in today's educational reality is contested due to practical complexities and subjective interpretations (MacKinnon & Hao, 2016; Vu, 2022), I argue that they represent important virtues that are notably absent from the digital transformation policies for education. As shown in the earlier analysis, the policies make no mention of balancing

[2] Vietnamese dynasties (1009–1400) noted for centralized rule, Confucian-Buddhist influence, and cultural consolidation.

technological development with moral values, intrinsic motivation for learning, or the needs of less advantaged groups. Teachers are largely neglected, with their presence portrayed as secondary to technology adoption.

Buddhism, a religion on the rise in contemporary Vietnam, also had a profound societal impact during the same historical period as Confucianism (MacKinnon & Hao, 2016; Tham, 2019). Its ethical teachings continue to shape Vietnamese education, especially in the realm of moral education. Values such as compassion, charity, and altruism (known as *Từ Bi*) are emphasized as a way to discourage individual competition and self-centeredness, as well as nurturing a collective ethos and collaborative spirit among students (Tham, 2019). However, policy discourses paint a contrasting picture, placing greater importance on international rankings and global competition over collective development. The consistent emphasis on nurturing individuals with advanced technical skills indicates that certain groups are prioritized over others, reflecting a technocratic philosophy rather than a collective one.

c. Conclusion to Sociocultural Analysis

This analysis adds further complexity to our understanding of digital transformation policies in Vietnamese education, capturing dynamics that are not fully visible in the first and second dimensions of Fairclough's model due to their more limited focus on textual features and production/consumption processes. As shown in this final layer of analysis, which synthesizes insights from multiple literatures on Vietnam's socio-cultural-political dynamics, the policy corpus reflects strong state-led capitalism and market-oriented logic that prioritize techno-optimistic values. Yet, it neglects the profound cultural and philosophical values that have historically shaped Vietnamese education. The influences of Confucianism and Buddhism are notably absent, despite their visible presence in educational ideals and classroom practices.

This erasure is not incidental. Instead, the policies actively promote a neoliberal ideology that prioritizes efficiency, productivity, and global rankings while simultaneously tightening state control through authoritative mandates and ideological claims presented as unquestionable facts. This vision creates a distorted reality that completely obscures Vietnam's enduring socio-cultural traditions. There is no mention of students' intrinsic motivation for learning,

teachers' roles, or the risk of social class discrimination. The vision of education presented in these policies fails to reflect its role as a deeply human and social process, where moral development is important, some individuals may be left behind, and collective values still contribute to sustaining society.

Section 2: Responses to Research Questions

As previously discussed, the full analysis using Fairclough's three-dimensional model provides a comprehensive foundation from which more focused insights can be drawn. This section presents responses to the three research questions based on that analysis.

Research Question 1: How do Vietnamese policies discursively construct the necessity of digital transformation in education?

Vietnamese policies construct digital transformation in education as an urgent and inevitable necessity. This transformation is framed not merely as a technological upgrade, but as a comprehensive reform that must encompass teaching, learning, knowledge storage, data exchange, school administration and culture. Across the documents, the discourse reflects a techno-optimistic vision in which digital transformation is portrayed as inherently progressive, necessary for national development, and aligned with socialist ideals of state-led modernization.

This sense of urgency and totality is achieved through various discursive strategies. Lexical choices consistently blend a techno-optimistic vocabulary with state-oriented imperatives, emphasizing control and supervision. The dominance of imperative constructions, high-modality expressions, and genre-mixing underscores the performative power of policy language in declaring rather than deliberating reform. Moreover, transitivity patterns construct the state as the active agent while positioning educational actors as either beneficiaries or implementers.

Research Question 2: What ideological assumptions and economic imperatives shape its discursive construction?

The discursive construction of digital transformation in Vietnamese education is shaped by a hybrid ideological model, often described as state-led neoliberalism or socialism with capitalist characteristics. This model retains centralized control while incorporating market-driven rationalities, including efficiency, innovation, and competitiveness.

Policies consistently construct the state as the central actor responsible for initiating and guiding transformation. However, this strong state presence is accompanied by a reformist logic that prioritizes digital tools, competitiveness and global benchmarking. This blend of statist authority and neoliberal techniques complicates and challenges the surface-level appearance of purely socialist governance, revealing a deeper ideological hybridity embedded within the discourse.

Research Question 3: How do these policies interact with the broader societal context within Vietnam?

The interaction between policy discourse and Vietnam's broader societal context is multifaceted and uneven. On one hand, the policies closely align with dominant political and economic structures, particularly the one-party system and a centralized capitalist model. The discourse reflects and reinforces these realities by centralizing power in the state, minimizing public participation, and promoting economic metrics as a national goal. In this regard, the policies affirm and reproduce the dominant ideologies of political centralism and market-oriented growth.

However, the interaction becomes more complex when it comes to cultural and spiritual dimensions. These policies largely omit or marginalize cultural legacies such as Confucian and Buddhist traditions, which have historically informed Vietnamese educational values. Principles like moral cultivation, collective responsibility, and intrinsic learning motivation are noticeably absent from the dominant discourse of digital transformation. Instead, digital transformation is framed almost exclusively in terms of technical efficiency, economic growth, and system modernization.

While the legacies of Confucianism and Buddhism are not unproblematic, they do offer potential resources for envisioning education as a moral and social practice, not merely a

digital or economic one. This selective representation illustrates how global discourses, particularly those rooted in neoliberal technocracy, are gradually displacing traditional cultural-philosophical foundations. The absence of these cultural values not only signals an ideological narrowing, but also reflects the top-down nature of policymaking, in which only certain narratives are legitimized.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Building on the findings that digital transformation policies in education are linguistically shaped by state-led neoliberal narratives and tend to reduce complex socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions to simplified, quantifiable global metrics, this chapter reflects on what such orientations mean for Vietnam's broader national context, considers how alternative futures might be imagined, and discusses the research's contributions to the wider field of digital transformation in education alongside the limitations that should be addressed.

4.1. In a Simplified Picture: Whose Interests Are Served? Who Is Left Behind?

Drawing directly from the findings in Chapter 3, where policies marginalize sociocultural values (Sociocultural Analysis) and prioritize techno-optimistic metrics (Textual Analysis), this section examines whose interests are served in this simplified picture.

Globally, this framing tends to benefit technology companies and individuals who already possess the resources and skills to navigate digital systems (Passey et al., 2023), often exacerbating rather than resolving existing inequalities. These global patterns find clear resonance in the Vietnamese context. However, a fuller understanding requires examining who is skilled in technology and who is left behind, along with the shared characteristics of each group.

In Vietnam, despite the rapid increase in digital access with growing numbers of individuals and households possessing digital devices (Kaila, 2023), structural disparities persist across ethnic, gender, and socio-economic lines (Tran et al., 2020). Ethnic minorities, remote communities, and female students remain disadvantaged due to intersecting barriers such as poverty, limited educational access, and language differences (Favorskaya, 2021; Singh, 2017). Additionally, although the push for digital transformation accelerates, Vietnam's cybersecurity frameworks and data protection policies lag behind, and training on digital safety remains limited. This puts these structurally marginalized groups at heightened risk, directly affecting their rights to data protection, information, and overall well-being (Nguyen et al., 2024).

By contrast, students in urban areas benefit from significantly better access to digital tools, infrastructure, and digitally integrated learning environments (Nhung et al., 2025), positioning them more favorably under state-driven digital transformation mandates. Meanwhile, growing concerns over personal data collection and misuse point to an emerging digital divide in power as well. Private technology companies with access to user data increasingly dominate Vietnam's digital landscape, and reports of hidden markets trading personal data (Nguyen et al., 2024) shows the uneven power relations between developers and users.

Clearly, in this simplified picture, the beneficiaries of digital transformation are those with access, skills, and institutional proximity, including urban students, well-resourced schools, and private technology firms. Meanwhile, rural learners, ethnic minorities, girls, and especially those situated at the intersections of these categories, are further marginalized on top of existing structural disadvantages. However, identifying who is "left behind" should not fall into the techno-optimistic trap of assuming that merely providing equal access to technology will solve deep-rooted inequalities (Timotheou et al., 2023). The deeper issue lies in questioning whose interests and visions of progress these policies ultimately serve. Those being left behind may have priorities that go beyond simply acquiring more devices or faster internet. Effective policy must begin by understanding what people truly need and desire, rather than assuming that technical inclusion alone can fit them into a single, predefined model of modernization (Selwyn & Facer, 2013).

Currently, the policy corpus invokes the notion of a collective Vietnamese identity only in abstract terms, rarely creating discursive or institutional space for genuine participation from marginalized groups. Global literature on policy and power (Gazeley et al., 2015) cautions that reforms shaped by restrictive assumptions can exacerbate existing inequalities by privileging dominant voices and interests. The findings of this research reflect this warning: by normalizing a singular, state-led vision of digital transformation without opening space for alternative visions, Vietnamese policies risk expanding the dominance of specific actors while leaving the concerns of marginalized communities largely unacknowledged.

4.2 Alternative Future Imagining

One act of resistance against the simplified picture of digital transformation in education is to reimagine alternative kinds of futures we want to work toward (Facer, 2013). This is not about forecasting or predicting a singular, fixed destination, but about opening space for alternative visions that resist instrumental, economically driven narratives and instead recognize education as a multifaceted practice (Facer, 2013). Acknowledging futures in the plural invites the possibility of imagining differently, allowing for uncertainty, contradiction, and creativity in how we shape education (Selwyn, 2019). By recognizing the present as full of untapped potential, this reimagining lays a foundational step in shifting educational development toward more inclusive and meaningful outcomes (Selwyn, 2021).

Drawing on the findings in Chapter 3, a review of literature on alternative frameworks in Chapter 1, and reflecting from my position as both a student of digital education and a Vietnamese woman, I take part in this reimagining process to offer a different vision than the one portrayed in official policy discourse.

In this alternative vision, education transcends its simplified techno-optimistic role as merely an economic driver or a measure of technological progress (Bishop et al., 2020; Tuomi, 2018). Instead, it empowers individuals from diverse backgrounds, genders, and political views to define education's meaning for themselves, free from exclusion based on identity or origin. In this future, policymaking spaces welcome diverse voices and needs, with a genuine commitment to crafting an educational system that serves as many learners as possible. My experiences in Vietnamese classrooms show that students are not solely driven by competitiveness or career prospects. As Murray (2023) suggests, education's purpose is not singularly defined. Four common aims, including Enhancement (skill development), Equality (reducing disparities), Emancipation (fostering agency), and Eudaimonia (promoting life flourishing and well-being), reflect the breadth of educational aspirations (Murray, 2023). Revisiting these core questions can drive us toward more inclusive schooling models.

In this reimagined vision, technology and digital innovation are not dismissed or essentially seen as harmful acts, following the warning of Weller (2020) against simplistic binary view of technology in education, but they are approached with greater sensitivity to the social,

political, and cultural contexts that shape learners' lives. The goal is to avoid what Selwyn (2019, p.12) calls the "technologically smart" but "socially stupid" pitfall, where technology overshadows human complexity. Education must be recognized as a deeply relational and socially rooted practice, not a domain easily automated. For a meaningful integration of technology, educational visions can also draw from longstanding cultural and philosophical traditions, as a step towards a decolonial approach to education technology (Cruz, 2021). In Vietnam, values inspired by Confucianism and Buddhism, such as collective responsibility, moral development, and an intrinsic love for learning, can offer meaningful alternatives to purely economic framings of education (MacKinnon & Hao, 2016). These values, which have shaped Vietnamese approaches to learning over generations, deserve renewed attention in conversations about digital education and future reform.

This vision also emphasizes data privacy, human dignity, and balancing global demands with local knowledge. Developing data justice frameworks can act as a practical step to integrate technology into educational practice without compromising students' rights and dignity (Nemorin et al., 2023; Zembylas, 2023). Taylor's (2017) framework on data (in)visibility, (dis)engagement and antidiscrimination can act as a reference for the development of a contextualized data justice framework. The inclusion of critical data literacies in education curriculum is another practical move toward a more inclusive environment where awareness is not simply framed within technical skills acquisition, but touches upon socio-political structural limits surrounding people of various identity backgrounds (Emejulu & McGregor, 2016; Taylor, 2024). By actively constructing alternatives to this dominant framing, this vision creates space for more inclusive and meaningful futures, grounded in care, equity, and possibility.

4.3. Grounding Imagined Futures in Sociocultural Roots: Turning Inward to Move Forward

While the reimagined futures discussed earlier may appear distant or idealistic, they are not beyond reach. These possibilities do not need to emerge from scratch or from imported blueprints. Instead, they can grow from what is already present, rooted in the sociocultural foundations that have long shaped Vietnamese education and collective life. Reclaiming

these roots, as opposed to abandoning them in pursuit of externally defined goals, offers a grounded, meaningful starting point for imagining and building more inclusive and sustainable futures.

In recent decades, numerous countries across the Global South, including Vietnam, have engaged in processes of educational reform shaped by efforts to align with prevailing Western-origin trends (Kieu, 2017; Sayed & Ahmed, 2011). While such alignment may bring certain forms of recognition or advancement, the focus on these metrics risks neglecting deeply held sociocultural values (Kieu, 2017; Sayed & Ahmed, 2011). The research findings reflect this phenomenon: by aligning national goals with global and regional metrics, policies often dismiss the longstanding traditions that have shaped Vietnam's education system.

This tendency is not inherently malicious, but it is consequential. As reflected in policy analysis in the previous section, moral development, collective responsibility, and a sense of community are at risk of being diminished. As previously discussed, marginalized groups are further excluded, and the diverse lived realities and aspirations of learners, particularly those not primarily motivated by economic gain, are often overlooked. Ironically, the pursuit of externally constructed benchmarks offers no guarantee of success for countries like Vietnam. Without the same historical, institutional, and economic foundations as many developed nations, competing on equal footing may remain perpetually out of reach (Tikly, 2004). In trying to close a gap not of their own making, policymakers may feel pressured to intensify reforms, demand higher performance, and prioritize efficiency. This approach can potentially lead to resource exhaustion, disconnection, and a prevailing sense of inadequacy (Muliavka, 2019). This is only one possible trajectory, not an inevitable truth. Yet recognizing these risks opens the path toward a more balanced approach that respects both economic goals and sociocultural values, without depleting national resources.

Moving toward a reimagined future requires beginning not with comparison, but with recognition. Instead of pursuing models that were not designed for their specific contexts, countries like Vietnam might ask which forms of knowledge, values, and ways of living already sustain and support their people. Recognizing these cultural foundations is not a call for cultural romanticism, but for contextual relevance (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). A culturally

grounded future does not reject economic or technological development; instead, it reframes progress as something aligned with social cohesion and collective wellbeing (Saavedra & Pérez, 2018). It acknowledges that nations with fewer structural advantages may not thrive by simply mimicking dominant models. Policies could cultivate strengths already present, such as those rooted in Confucian and Buddhist traditions, including collective responsibility, moral development, and an intrinsic love for learning. These values can serve as the foundation for building inclusive ecosystems where people feel safe, respected, and able to contribute meaningfully.

These values are not incompatible with digital transformation; instead, they offer a different logic. This logic views education not as a race or a market, but as a lifelong process of becoming grounded in community. Within this perspective, economic vitality emerges not through imposed benchmarks, but as a natural outcome of a healthy, resilient society (Marino et al., 2025). Shifting toward more participatory policy-making, which creates space for a wider range of voices, can help cultivate futures that remain both rooted in cultural foundations and responsive to contemporary challenges (Krick, 2022). By turning inward and reclaiming trust in the sociocultural values already present, the imagined future becomes less a distant ideal and more a direction shaped by existing strengths and nurtured with intention.

4.4. Research Contributions and Limitations

This research is ultimately grounded in my belief that education, particularly digital education, cannot be fully separated from its political and ideological foundations. In the context of Vietnam, a one-party state where educational agendas are closely tied to national development narratives, this connection becomes especially evident. Much of the existing literature on digital transformation in Vietnamese education remains descriptive, often outlining policy directions, technical mechanisms, or global comparisons. However, there is a notable lack of work that critically interrogates the political, ideological, and sociocultural underpinnings of such transformations. This research contributes to filling that gap by applying a CDA framework to examine how state-issued policies construct digital education futures and by uncovering the discursive logics and sociocultural aspects that shape what is imagined, prioritized, and excluded.

Building on this contribution, I oriented the research beyond surface-level engagements and into deeper ideological terrains. Research methods involving human participation, such as interviews, focus groups, or surveys, often reveal only partial or constrained perspectives, limited by context, participants' positionality, or political sensitivity (Anh-Susann, 2022). In contrast, the analysis of government-issued texts offers a valuable source for examining authoritative meaning-making (Bacchi, 2009). By situating these texts within broader social, cultural, and political contexts, I exposed how power operates through language, and how certain visions of education become legitimized while others are silenced. Through this approach, the research opens space for imagining alternative futures that are more grounded in Vietnam's own sociocultural traditions, rather than merely aspiring toward externally imposed benchmarks.

However, I acknowledge that this research possesses some limitations. Its primary focus on ideological and discursive analysis means that questions of practical implementation, such as how digital transformation policies are enacted on the ground and translated into institutional realities, remain beyond its immediate scope. A discursive lens is essential for uncovering the deeper logics of reform but does not, by itself, provide a full picture of how these reforms take shape in practice. Future research would benefit from engaging more directly with implementation dynamics, including the tensions, adaptations, and negotiations that occur when policy meets practice.

Language differences present another challenge, as even the most advanced translation tools may not fully capture the nuanced connotations and cultural context embedded in Vietnamese policy texts (Naveen & Trojovský, 2024). This limitation could affect the subtle interpretation of meaning and highlights the complexity of achieving complete linguistic equivalence in cross-language analysis (Squires, 2009).

Additionally, although I propose reimagined futures grounded in Vietnam's sociocultural values, this idea remains largely theoretical. The exploration of these alternative pathways, shaped by moral and collective ideals, has not yet extended to empirical inquiries into how such models might be realized in practice. Comparative studies with contexts that have explicitly integrated indigenous or non-Western values into their digital education

frameworks, such as Aotearoa New Zealand's incorporation of Māori perspectives, could offer instructive examples (Maniapoto et al., 2025). Further research could examine how such models balance global pressures with local commitments, and what Vietnam might learn from these experiences in building contextually relevant futures.

Furthermore, I acknowledge the research's inherent limitations related to my positionality and analytical perspective. My interpretations are inevitably shaped by my personal experiences, academic training, and sociocultural background. Even my choice to use CDA, driven by a commitment to amplify alternative perspectives that challenge dominant policy discourses not intended to benefit people from disadvantaged backgrounds like mine, reduces engagement with the strengths and practical aspects of these policies. While I have sought to be transparent about my positionality and have critically reflected on it throughout the research process, it is important to recognize that no analysis can be entirely free from subjective influence. This reflexivity is an integral part of critical discourse analysis, and acknowledging it helps to situate the findings within the context of the researcher's viewpoint and limitations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this research, I examined how digital transformation in Vietnamese education is constructed through policy discourse, the ideological and economic forces that shape this construction, and the ways these policies interact with broader Vietnamese society. Using Fairclough's CDA framework, supported by the corpus-assisted software AntConc, I moved from close textual reading to discursive practice and sociocultural explanation to show how language, institutional practice, and cultural context together legitimize some visions of digital transformation while marginalizing others.

The analysis shows that Vietnamese policies discursively frame digital transformation as urgent, inevitable, and all-encompassing, essential for boosting national competitiveness. These narratives are driven by the one-party political structure and neoliberal logic, which increasingly dominate the country's educational landscape. In doing so, they neglect the socio-cultural and spiritual foundations that have long underpinned Vietnamese education, rooted in Confucian and Buddhist values, such as intrinsic motivations for learning, respect for teachers, moral education, and collective responsibilities. This prioritization of economic and political imperatives over enduring sociocultural concerns normalizes a narrowed view of educational progress, reducing it to global, quantifiable metrics like efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness. Consequently, collective ideals are subordinated to global rankings, teachers become secondary to technology, and intrinsic values or moral learning are overshadowed by technical skills.

This portrayal serves the interests of well-resourced urban educational institutions, their students, and technological firms that gain access to users' data, while further marginalizing rural institutions and learners, ethnic minorities, girls, and those at the intersections of these groups. Addressing these disparities requires going beyond merely providing more technologies, resources, or technical skills to "equalize" the marginalized with the beneficiaries. Instead, it demands a profound ideological challenge: questioning whether digital transformation, as narrated, is truly inevitable; identifying what diverse groups genuinely need; and ensuring policies reflect this diversity without compromising people's rights and dignity.

Future reimagination plays a crucial role here by reframing digital transformation within an alternative narrative. As discussed in Chapter 4, I connected the theoretical frameworks from the literature review in Chapter 1 with the findings in Chapter 3, incorporating my own reflexivity to propose a decolonial approach that restores the inward socio-cultural values drawn from Confucian and Buddhist values, although I acknowledge that practical applications remain underexplored within this study's scope. I also advocated for developing a contextualized data justice framework and integrating critical data literacies into educational curricula to foster a more justice-based approach to digital transformation.

Realizing this future calls for a profound ideological shift, but it is not beyond reach. Rather, it involves a gradual reclaiming of trust in local values and practices as the foundation for building more inclusive digital futures, instead of a restless pursuit of external metrics that were not designed to serve the nation's unique context. That vision is one I deeply hope for my country, yet I am open to alternative possibilities that preserve these cultural foundations. I recognize that real-world implementation is far more complex, entangled with uncertain variables, than envisioning it in research. Nonetheless, without a radical ideological transformation, it remains difficult to foresee a system that truly uplifts a future-born female from a background like mine, leaving narratives of inclusivity and improved living standards perpetually performative.

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APPENDIX 1:

List of Policy Documents Selected for Analysis

No.	Translation provided by:	Translated Version	Name	Types	Issuing year	Reference number
1	LuatVietnam	Circular 30	Prescribing information technology application in online training for higher education	Circular	2023	No. 30/2023/TT-BGDDT
2		Decision 127	Promulgating the national strategy for artificial intelligence research, development and application through 2030	Decision	2021	No. 127/QD-TTg
3		Decision 411	Approving the national strategy for development of digital economy and digital society through 2025, with orientations toward 2030	Decision	2022	No. 411/QD-TTg
4		Decision 749	Approving the national digital transformation program through 2025, with orientations toward 2030	Decision	2020	No. 749/QD-TTg

5		Decision 146	Approving the Scheme for "improvement of awareness, universalization of skills, and development of personnel for national digital transformation by 2025, with a vision towards 2030"	Decision	2022	No. 146/QD-TTg
6		Resolution 193	On pilot application of a number of special mechanisms and policies to create breakthroughs in science and technology development, innovation and national digital transformation	Resolution	2025	No. 193/2025/QH15
7		Decision 942	Approving the e-Government development strategy towards the digital Government in the 2021 – 2025 period, with a vision to 2030	Decision	2021	No. 942/QD-TTg
8		Resolution 52	On a number of guidelines and policies to actively	Resolution	2019	No. 52-NQ/TW

			participate in the Fourth Industrial Revolution			
9	DeepL	Resolution 57	On Breakthrough Development in Science, Technology, Innovation, and National Digital Transformation	Resolution	2024	No. 57-NQ/TW
10		Decision 131	Approving the Project "Strengthening the Application of Information Technology and Digital Transformation in Education and Training for the Period 2022-2025, with a Vision to 2030"	Decision	2022	No. 131/QD-TTg
11		Notice 171	Conclusions of the first meeting of the government's steering committee on Science, Technology, Innovation, Digital Transformation, and Project 06	Notice	2025	No. 171/TB-VPCP
12		Decision 374	Approving the project on the development of an excellent training center	Decision	2025	No. 374/QD-TTg

			system for Talent in 4.0 Technology by 2030			
13		Decision 1282	Issuing the plan to strengthen the application of information technology and digital transformation in Education and Training for the 2022-2025 by the Ministry of Education and Training	Decision	2022	No. 1282/QD-BGDDT
14		Decision 1002	Approving the Human Resources Development Plan for High-Tech Development for the period 2025–2035 and Orientation toward 2045	Decision	2025	No. 1002/QD-TTg
15		Decision 2222	Approval of the digital transformation program in vocational education by 2025, with a vision to 2030	Decision	2021	No. 2222/QD-TTg
16		Dispatch 4966	Regarding the implementation of information technology application tasks for	Dispatch	2019	No. 4966/MOET-IT

			higher education institutions, teacher training colleges, and vocational training centers			