Media visibility and the political use of global rankings have highlighted the topicality and relevance of comparative studies in education. This popularity has not entailed the development of theoretical instruments in the field, however. Conversely, non-historical and decontextualised concepts such as efficiency, accountability and quality are colonising the educational world undisputed and uncontested, largely due to the fact that they have been internationally advocated. Comparative education is still suffering from certain methodological deficits and serious under-theorisation. (See, e.g., Marginson & Mollis, 2001; Schriewer, 2006; Dale, 2009; Cowen, 2009; Simola, 2009)

The theoretical tradition in comparative education research is not too strong, which may be one reason for the success of the ahistorical and decontextualised conceptualisations in the field. Likewise, functionalistic comparisons based on different system models have become the mainstream among transnational organisations such as the World Bank, the OECD and the EU. This rather mechanistic kind of paradigm has been the bane of comparative research in the past.

There has also been heavy criticism of the solely quantitative comparative type of research, and case-study methodology has found its place. One of the pioneers in this context was Charles Ragin (1987; 1989; 1992), who tried to put right the antinomies of the quantitative and qualitative approaches through so-called “analytic induction”, taking into account the diversity of the causes and the reasons for social change in different nations. One of the most interesting approaches in comparative research is the so-called “patterned mess” – suggested by Michael Mann (1986; 1993), among others, in his comparative analysis of sources of social power. These approaches are very well suited to comparisons of Higher Education politics in different countries, for instance, because HE institutions have usually operated in a state of “organized anarchy” (Clark, 1993; see Kivinen & Rinne 1995, pp. 231, 241).

António Nóvoa and Tali Yariv-Mashal’s observation of a few years ago seems still to be valid:

The problem is that the term comparison is being mainly used as a flag of convenience, intended to attract international interest and money and to entail the need to assess national policies with reference to world scales and hierarchies. The result is a ‘soft comparison’ lacking any solid theoretical or methodological grounds. (Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003, p. 425)
The problem is not restricted to the field of comparative education, of course. Susan Strange (1997), a prominent representative of the approach known as international political economy, sharply criticised ‘neo-institutionalists’ and ‘comparativists’ for reiterating policy agendas aiming at national success in the global struggle for competitiveness. This ‘unbearable narrowness of the national view’ (Kettunen, 2008) could be seen as a professional illness emanating from the comparative policy studies of our times.

Roger Dale (2009, p. 123; cf. Beck, 2006) refers to three fundamental problems in comparative studies in education: methodological nationalism, methodological statism and methodological educationalism. The nation and the nation-state are still seen as the only real and final policy unit, and the very concept of education is taken for granted. Instead of ‘models’ and the convergence or divergence among them, we should be more interested “in the webs of structural power operating throughout the world system than in comparative analysis of discrete parts of it, bounded by territorial frontiers dividing states” (Strange, 1997, p. 182). Education is still most often seen only as a question of increasing competences and qualifications among nation-state citizens in the face of global competition among knowledge-based economies. Decades ago John W. Meyer (1986, pp. 345-346) warned about ‘functional blinders’ that permit us to take schooling as a self-evident rational system and create a moralist discourse - among not only educationalists but also sociologists of education.

This narrowness of the national view easily creates a blind spot in terms of how interactions and comparisons reconstruct the national or the local: how transnational interactions and crossings constitute the national parties of these relationships, and here we come to the crucial role of comparative practices as a mode of reflexivity that (re)shapes individual and collective agency (Strange, 1997). In pursuance of an understanding of such a complex phenomenon as the relationship between the global, the regional, the national and the local in education policy formation it is vital to consider the theoretical conceptualisations from a both/and rather than an either/or point of view. A good and illuminating example here is the controversy among researchers of nationalism and the frequently observed confrontation between understanding nationalism as ‘the invention of traditions’ by the elite (e.g., Hobsbawm, 1990) or as creating prerequisites and limits for ethnic identities (e.g., Smith, 1995). From the perspective of comparative research, nationalism as an elite strategy and nationalism as a socio-cultural frame are both valid approaches. Comparative actions (such as the PISA studies) should be analysed both as economic, political and cultural practices (see, e.g., Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal, 2003; Simola et al., forthcoming) and as international exhibitions of national competitiveness in the global educational market place.

A Finnish researcher of modern history, Pauli Kettunen (forthcoming), emphasises that criticism of the nation-state-centred view on globalisation should not just declare it outdated, but should rather take it seriously as an influential mode of thought and action, and recognise how it is embedded in the structures of globalised economic competition. Such a critical ambition means getting beyond the train of thought that contrasts the profound internal permanence of national agency with the drastic change in the external environment. Historicity means the temporal