STUDI E RICERCHE

University in prison: a systematic literature review on students' tutor*

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Università in carcere: una revisione sistematica della letteratura sui tutor per gli studenti detenuti

Abstract

The article presents the results of a systematic review of the international literature on university tutoring practices in prisons, an under-researched yet crucial area for ensuring the right to education. Using the PRISMA methodology, the outcomes of research conducted on the EBSCO platform were analyzed to answer the following research question: What is the role and what are the practices of university tutoring in prison? Three main themes were identified: peer tutoring, tutoring organized with external individuals (most often students or university staff), and educational methods/tools adapted to the prison context. While international literature highlights key elements for the implementation of university tutoring programs, it also reveals that this field remains largely unexplored, encouraging further research.

Keywords
Prison education, Higher education, Tutoring, Collaborative practices

L'articolo presenta i risultati di una revisione sistematica della letteratura internazionale riguardante le pratiche e le esperienze di *tutoring* universitario in carcere, un ambito poco studiato ma cruciale per garantire il diritto allo studio agli studenti universitari ristretti. Utilizzando la metodologia PRISMA, sono stati analizzati gli esiti di una ricerca condotta sulla piattaforma EBSCO, al fine di rispondere al seguente interrogativo di ricerca: qual è il ruolo e quali sono le pratiche per il *tutoring* universitario in carcere? Sono stati identificati tre temi principali: il tutoraggio tra pari, il tutoraggio organizzato con persone esterne (quasi sempre studenti o staff delle università) e i metodi/strumenti educativi adattati al contesto carcerario. La letteratura internazionale, pur permettendo l'emersione di elementi importanti per l'implementazione di percorsi di *tutoring* universitario in carcere, rivela un campo ancora da esplorare, incoraggiando ulteriori ricerche.

Parole chiave
Educazione in carcere, istruzione universitaria, tutoring, pratiche collaborative

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1. Introduction

The Italian higher education programs in prison (known as "Poli universitari penitenziari") are an initiative that has no equivalent in the European Union, in terms of the number of students, universities, and prisons involved, although several similar experiences exist worldwide (Parchuc, 2015; Darke, Aresti, 2016; Umpierrez, 2016; Friso, Decembrotto, 2018). University in prison constitutes a system of services and opportunities offered to students in prison enrolled in three-year and master's degree courses with the aim of overcoming the obstacles that prevent an effective exercise of the right to study (Palma et al., 2016). More specifically, university in prison is designed to guarantee the right to study for all those eligible to access a degree course and wish to do so, even while incarcerated, and to facilitate their access to higher education (Friso, Decembrotto, 2018; Prina, 2020). Occasionally, it may promote cultural initiatives, even for people in prison not enrolled in university, and may also offer important moments of exchange between incarcerated and free students. These are all opportunities to rethink the university through prison (Umpierrez, Sosa, 2023).

In Italy, higher education programs in prison have been developed since the late 1990s and continue to grow, with 43 universities involved. In the academic year 2022/23 there were 1,458 university students in prison: 1,267 enrolled in bachelor's degree courses, 94 in master's degree courses, 95 in single-cycle master's degree courses and 2 in doctoral programs; 11 universities have activated tutoring support among the services offered to these students.

Tutors (or mentors) play a key role in the sustainability of higher education in prison, providing study support, materials, and facilitating dialogue with university lecturers, among other tasks. Often the tutors are volunteer students, sometimes remunerated, who dedicate their skills to the students in prison. This relationship is often between peers – students inside and outside prison, incarcerated and free – who meet to discuss university topics and study subjects, but these meetings also become valuable opportunities for personal growth for both parties. Tutoring is an encounter based on learning accompaniment and mediation, but also on mutual co-evolution, considering co-learning processes involving the mutual exchange of skills and knowledge, or practices of co-producing knowledge. It represents a true experience of change (Bustelo, Decembrotto, 2020).

The role of the university tutor, including peer tutors, has been widely studied through educational research and literature in Italy (Pintus, Mambriani, 2023). Tutors are pivotal in supporting students, contributing to students' fulfillment of their goals, and fostering inclusive pathways. Particular attention has been given to their role in developing effective support systems for diverse student populations, including those with disabilities (Biasin, 2019; Da Re et al., 2023; Pintus, Mambriani, 2023). Their role involves developing relational and didactic skills, to address student needs and reduce dropout rates (Magnoler, 2017; Bonelli et al., 2022). Educational research also insists on peer tutoring practices, a model that emphasizes reciprocal learning and mutual growth between students, which has proven effective in both general and specialized contexts (Da Re, 2012; Colvin, 2007).

The research underpinning this article aims to explore how tutoring in prisons is developing in Italy, gathering experiences and disseminating best practices in terms of inclusive pathways, as well as spaces that have been traversed and redefined, in the interaction between tutors and students in prison. The first step involved a systematic review of the international literature on the subject to understand what has been written about this relationship in other programs. This article presents the findings of a systematic literature review on the topic of university tutoring in prison.

2. A systematic literature review: how the analyses were conducted

To conduct a rigorous and systematic review of the international literature on the presence and practices of university tutoring in prison settings, we employed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) methodology, renowned for ensuring methodological rigor and precision in results (Moher et al., 2009). The search process adhered to a comprehensive 27-item checklist, which structured both the selection and thematic analysis of scientific publications sourced from international databases.

Articles were meticulously selected based on their strong theoretical and methodological frameworks, focusing on those that most effectively illuminated the motivations, practices, and outcomes of tutoring interventions designed to support university education in prisons.

Aligned with the core objectives of our project, this systematic literature review serves as a critical foundational step, laying the groundwork for the empirical phase of the research and refining the key questions to be addressed. Moreover, the findings from this international review of interactions between incarcerated and non-incarcerated university students provide a valuable resource for the academic community, offering innovative insights to continuously refine and strengthen practices and tools that promote equitable access to higher education within prison settings.

2.1 *Methods*

The systematic review was conducted using the EBSCOhost platform, with a special reference to Education Source, APA PsycInfo, Index to Legal Periodicals & Books Full Text (H.W. Wilson), Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, America: History & Life, CINAHL Complete, Historical Abstracts with Full Text, APA PsycArticles, Communication Abstracts, and MLA International Bibliography with Full Text. To explore grey literature, Google Scholar was also consulted. The final search on these platforms was performed on June 18, 2024, using the following Boolean search strings:

1) tutor OR tutoring OR mentoring OR tutor students
2) AND higher education OR college OR university OR post-secondary OR postsecondary
3) AND prison OR jail OR incarceration OR imprisonment OR correctional facilities OR prisoners OR inmatesOR criminals OR offenders OR incarcerated people
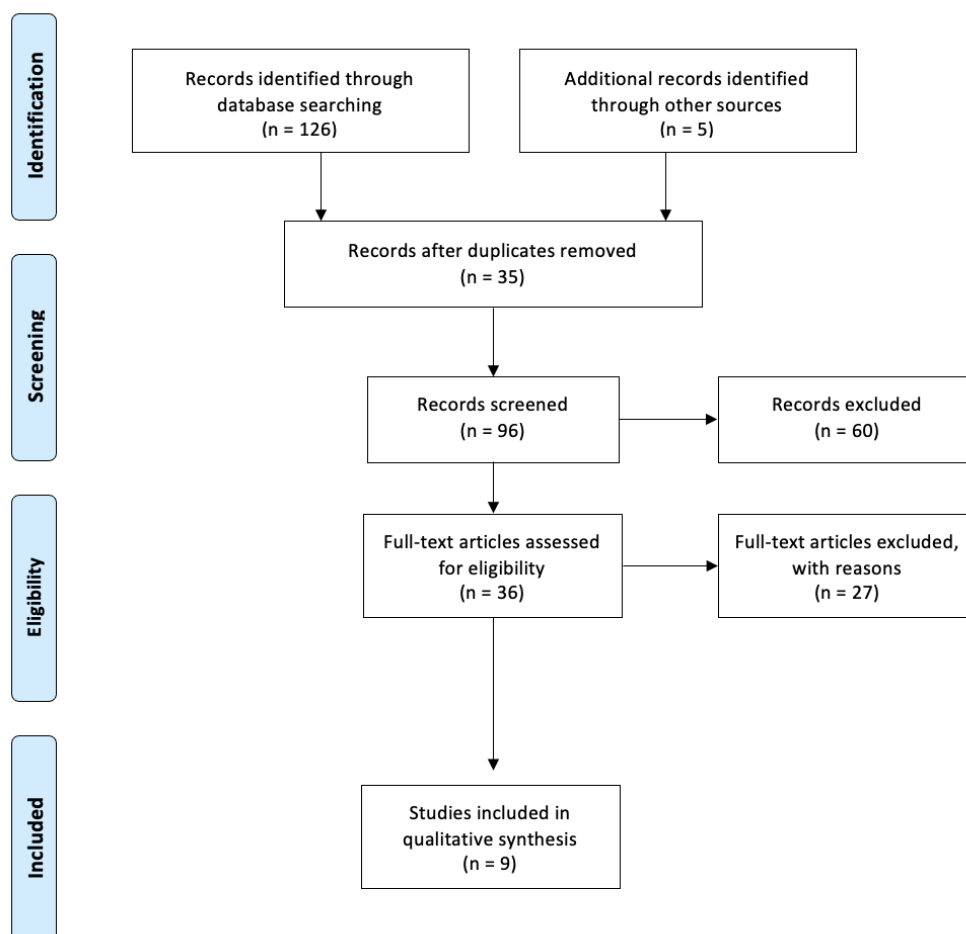

Fig. 1: PRISMA Flow chart (Moher et al., 2009)

The flowchart outlines the systematic review process used to select studies for analysis. The identification phase began with 126 studies retrieved through database searches, along with 5 additional studies sourced from Google Scholar and other websites. After removing 35 duplicates, 96 studies remained for the screening. Following the process, 60 studies were excluded, leaving 36 to be examined in full text. Of these, 27 studies were excluded based on inclusion/exclusion criteria, resulting in 9 studies being included in the final analysis. Based on the research question, we established the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

– During the identification phase: only articles from the EBSCOhost database, peer-reviewed articles, and full-text articles were included. No time restrictions were applied, as there have been no significant recent reforms in prison systems, which also vary significantly across different regions.
– During the screening and eligibility phase: We included articles involving minors, provided they focused on minors in detention (excluding those in community-based programs or those mentioned only because they are the children of incarcerated individuals). Articles on mentoring without a clear focus on prisons were excluded, as well as articles on prison-based mentoring programs that did not specifically address higher education.

2.2 *Results*

To organise the description of the results provided by the PRISMA analysis we have outlined three pressing themes regarding students' tutoring in prison. In addressing the research question – "What is the role of and what are the practices for tutoring/mentoring university students in prison?" – literature can be categorized into: peer-tutoring, university-supported tutoring, educational practices and modalities. The first two concern the mode through which mentoring is acted upon, the third concerns the methods and tools:

Peer-led tutoring emphasizes the role of incarcerated individuals providing academic support to their peers, fostering both educational progress and personal development within the prison setting.

University-supported tutoring explores the contributions of faculty and students from outside the prison who offer tutoring through distance learning or collaborative programs, establishing important connections between the academic community and the students who find themselves spending a period of their lives in prison.

Educational practices and modalities delve into educational practices and tools employed in prison education, such as telephone tutoring, written materials, demonstrating how these approaches are adapted to overcome the rigid conformation and obstacles in the processes of ensuring accessibility to the right to study for people in prison.

2.3 *Discussion*

The purpose now is to further explore how the selected articles contribute to addressing our research question: "What is the role of and what are the practices for tutoring/mentoring university students in prison?"

In The Unity in Community: Fostering Academic Success Among Diverse Communities of Male Offenders in Correctional Institutions (2018), the authors, two post-secondary educators in a medium- and high-security prison in North Indiana, are engaged in sharing reflections on the centrality of what they call «utopian environment» or «moral communities» for the education of incarcerated persons. The intent is to emphasize the need for a multiplicity of figures who can support the study paths of incarcerated persons (Rose, Voss, 2018, p. 143). The authors list, based on their own experience, what tools are available to implement these collaborative learning environments. Among all of them, focusing mainly on the attitudes and skills of classroom teachers, we are especially interested in the employment of university tutors and the opportunities given to the prison and the academic community to meet: «I, in collaboration with faculty and correctional personnel, facilitated external integration of the learning community by inviting guest speakers, choral groups, musicians, and others from the larger external community to further cultivate the transfer of the learning process» (p. 139). Academic tutors are both students who come from outside

and inmate students who are trained and employed to support the study path of peers: «For example, I empowered offender students, based on their qualifications and talents, to serve their community as academic tutors, computer lab monitors and facilitators, and teacher assistants. So that offenders can be both students and workers […]» (p. 139).

Ryan M. Moser (2020), in A Different Kind of Labor: Writing in Prison, discusses the transformative role of creative writing programs in the prison system, particularly through the "Exchange for Change" initiative. The article primarily highlights the benefits of writing workshops: «No harm can come from teaching someone in prison to be a better student and teacher. Much harm can come from warehousing people in a cell block filled with violence until they are released» (p. 100). Although the focus is not on formal university tutoring or mentoring, the article demonstrates how creative writing programs encourage educational engagement, offering incarcerated individuals' opportunities for both academic and personal development. Furthermore, the E4C projects introduced a form of writing tutoring by involving students from Florida International University and the University of Miami in a letter correspondence: «E4C teaches writing in prisons and runs anonymous letter exchanges between incarcerated students and students studying in outside universities» (p. 90). Moreover, during the restrictive measures to contain the covid-19 pandemic, students in the prison program self-organized and, independently, ran a creative writing workshop, the CoronaCreativeWriting: «the hunger for knowledge and the drive to engage was no less present in the dormitory than it was on the compound at large» (p. 96).

The article Peer Mentoring in a Young Offenders Institution, by Thomas and Buck (2019) were included because of the interesting experience of orientation for Higher Education. The article explores a peer mentoring initiative aimed at supporting young offenders in setting educational goals. The initiative centers on providing young offenders with skills to mentor their peers, navigating educational opportunities during and after incarceration. A notable aspect is its connection to higher education, as the program encourages participants to consider further study, including vocational and university-level education: « The objective of this project was to provide a positive experience for the prisoners that would enable them to plan for a successful future and to see the benefits of further study including, potentially, higher education» (p. 72). The mentoring program, within the "Lifelong Learning Network", assists learners in exploring non-traditional routes into higher education. Through the mentoring process, participants develop personal plans that help them identify pathways to college or university, and the peer mentors play a crucial role in motivating their mentees to pursue these goals.

Weaver, Rousseau, and Napior (2021), in Learning from Teachers: A Needs Assessment of Faculty in Postsecondary Correctional Education, focus on the experiences of faculty delivering postsecondary education to incarcerated university students through the Boston University Prison Education Program (PEP). While primarily centered on faculty experiences, the article implicitly underscores the importance of tutoring and mentoring support systems to enhance educational outcomes. Faculty members highlight the need for greater access to support, including teaching assistants and tutors provided by external programs like the Petey Greene Program: «This collaboration has improved the BU PEP's capacity to successfully support its students. Ongoing collaborations can contribute significantly to PSCE and should be sought out and considered. Programs should explore what local resources are available» (Weaver et al., 2020, p. 42). These tutoring roles help address challenges such as limited time and access to incarcerated students, allowing faculty to concentrate more effectively on teaching higher education within prison. Although external university students are not directly involved, the collaboration between faculty and tutors plays a pivotal role in supporting incarcerated students in navigating the educational constraints of the prison environment.

Julie Wilson's article, Advocates for Education in Prison-Based Writing Centers (2023), offers a deep exploration of tutoring in female prison-based educational settings, in particular in writing groups organized in higher educational programs. The research, led by the author, was conducted using a qualitative action research design, combining scholarship, interviews, and iterative practice at a women's prison. Wilson highlights the significant role of peer tutors, highlighting that incarcerated students bring credibility and shared experiences that can better address the needs of their peers, as seen in successful programs that employ these students as peer tutors. However, she critiques generalist educational and tutoring models, which are often inadequate in a setting where students have limited access to academic resources, explaining that incarcerated students need specialized support from faculty rather than general tutoring tips: «Students

need opportunities to rebuild confidence in educational settings, which educators can do by pairing high expectations with trusting in students' abilities and providing high levels of connection and support» (Wilson, p. 12). Tutors «need to have academical credibility among their peers» and «should be compensated» (p. 16). Additionally, the author stresses the importance of trauma-informed tutoring, recognizing that many incarcerated students have experienced trauma that can impact their learning: «Many incarcerated students enter college courses doubting they can achieve. Among traumas that incarcerated students have experienced are educational traumas» (p. 12). Consistency and a student-centered approach help build trust over time, with tutors needing to be available without insisting on help; or building a safe space that accepts students expressing emotional distress.

In his article, A Writing Center in Prison: The Value of Collaborative Learning, Rios (2021) delves into the development of a prison-based writing center that operates through peer tutoring and collaborative learning. Incarcerated students, including those training to be writing advisors, engage in informal discussions and provide peer critiques on writing assignments, thereby fostering a supportive learning community. The decentralized nature of this tutoring model shifts much of the responsibility for learning onto the students themselves, empowering them to take active roles in their education. While external writing advisors from North Park University offer occasional support, the primary focus remains on peer tutoring within the prison.

Palmer-Cooper (2018), in Students in Diverse Environments – Supporting Education in Prisons, through a Secure Environment student's experience, discusses the challenges of supporting incarcerated students enrolled in higher education through distance learning. The article provides detailed accounts of how bespoke study materials, created specifically for a high-security prison student, address the lack of access to the internet and virtual learning environments used by traditional students. Palmer-Cooper emphasizes the importance of flexible and personalized tutoring practices, as standard methods of online tutorials and peer collaboration are unavailable in prisons. Instead, tutors must offer one-on-one support through telephone tutorials or face-to-face sessions, and written feedback, ensuring student engagement and academic progress. The article also highlights institutional barriers, such as limited study time and restricted access to learning materials, which complicate the educational experience for incarcerated students.

Jamal Bakr (2023), in Prison: The New Frontier of Collaborative Learning, examines the role of collaborative learning in transforming the educational experiences of incarcerated individuals. The author believes that knowledge is «generated socially» and that knowledge «created in this way generates a social paradigmatic shift in the community of learners who are contextually generating knowledge together» (p. 128). Drawing on his experience as a writing tutor and teaching fellow at Stateville Correctional Center, Bakr emphasizes how collaborative learning fosters peer-to-peer knowledge construction, creating spaces where incarcerated individuals tutor and mentor one another. Many of the students at Stateville are pursuing higher education degrees through partnerships with universities such as North Park and Northwestern. The article also briefly mentions external university students who collaborate with incarcerated learners through programs that connect inside and outside students. However, the primary focus remains on how collaborative learning within prison fosters both academic and personal development, helping individuals overcome the isolation of the prison environment: « For the learners that feel isolated from the peers next to them, collaborative practices help them resist the false notion that they have no stake in creating one another's capacity to know» (p. 131).

Finally, in Creating Opportunity in Prison Education: Interns and Tutors, Zavrel (2019) describes the implementation of two educational programs at Larch Corrections Center: an internship program for graduate students and a tutor training program for incarcerated teaching assistants (TAs). While the article focuses primarily on GED and business education, it offers valuable insights into peer tutoring practices that are applicable to higher education contexts. Firstly, the TA's were interviewed «with the same questions and standards» as outside, in order (p. 71). The tutor training program equips incarcerated individuals to tutor their peers, including «the inmate-tutor perspective on what should be included in inmate-tutor training» (p. 73) and allowing students to receive personalized academic support from those who understand the specific challenges of prison education. This peer-led model «has obvious effects on tutor confidence, especially in the tutor's self-perceived capacity for higher education» (p. 74): the article highlights

how peer tutoring not only supports immediate academic success but also fosters long-term educational aspirations, preparing incarcerated individuals for successful reentry into society.

3. Analysis

The literature reviewed on tutoring and mentoring practices for university students in prison highlights three major themes: *peer-led tutoring*, *university-supported tutoring*, and *educational practices and modalities*. Each theme sheds light on different aspects of educational engagement within prison settings, revealing the variety and adaptability of tutoring approaches to meet the unique needs of incarcerated students.

	Peer-tutoring	University-supported tutoring	Educational Practices and Modalities
Rose, Voss, 2018	Trained peer-tutors and Teaching Assistants	Students from outside	Community organizing through cultural activities
Moser, 2021	Peer-supported *CoronaCreativeWriting* group	*Exchange for Change* project	Anonymous corrispondence with outside's university students
Thomas, Buck, 2010	Orientation for higher education in young offenders' institutions		
Weaver et al., 2020		Central role in supporting faculty's work in prison	
Wilson, 2023	In woman prison		Trauma informed tutoring
Rios, 2021	Central role, university staff only supports when needed		Writing groups
Palmer-Cooper, 2018		College students and staff	Distance learning, telephone calls
Bakr, 2023		Staff from outside to build a community	Collaborative learning, writing groups
Zavrel, 2019	internship program for graduate students, tutor training program for incarcerated teaching assistants		Training for tutors as a professional experience

Tab. 1: Summary of the main themes of the literature review

3.1 *Peer-Led Tutoring*

Peer-led tutoring emerges as a critical element in several studies, highlighting the effectiveness of incarcerated individuals mentoring and supporting their peers. This approach not only helps to build a supportive learning environment but also empowers both tutors and tutees to take control of their academic journeys. One of the most frequent and studied methods of supporting university education in prisons is undoubtedly peer tutoring. The selected articles highlight its transformative potential and diverse implementation strategies. Two key themes emerge: on the one hand, there is the educational and professional value of peer tutoring experiences (Rose, Voss; Zavrel, 2019; and also Thomas, Buck, 2010 in juvenile contexts), and on the other hand, the social and communal value (Moser, 2021; Rios, 2021). Some peer tutoring programs are employed in academic and/or professional orientation activities (Thomas, Buck, 2010; Zavrel), while others are used in academic writing groups (Moser, 2021; Wilson, 2019). Only one of the articles specifically addresses programs dedicated to incarcerated women, and none mention Trans or

non-binary individuals. This suggests a general gender gap in access to university experiences. Articles such as those by Rios (2021) and Zavrel (2019) also demonstrate how incarcerated individuals trained as peer tutors create opportunities for academic success, often under challenging institutional constraints. The peer mentors play a key role in motivating their peers to pursue academic goals, offering a personalized approach to support. In both cases, peer-led tutoring fosters both academic achievement and personal development by creating a sense of shared responsibility and empowerment within the prison environment. Studies consistently demonstrate that peer tutoring is instrumental in addressing academic gaps and overcoming the isolation often experienced by incarcerated students, fostering a collaborative, student-driven learning process.

3.2 *University-supported tutoring*

The experiences of tutoring in collaboration with university students and assistants are certainly less represented in the analyzed scientific articles. This is indicative of the foundational difficulty in bridging the gap between the world inside and outside the prison, which leads to the exclusion of incarcerated individuals and the inaccessibility of academic careers. Rose and Voss (2018), for instance, involve external participants through cultural activities related to academic work but not necessarily curricular (within the realm of what in Italy is referred to as the university's third mission, or public engagement): conferences, seminars, choirs, presentations. Moser (2021), writing an autoethnography of his experience as a writer in prison, recounts how his relationship with university students outside the prison mainly occurred through anonymous letter exchanges. This activity, easily justified by the fact that it pertained to a creative writing academic project, was facilitated by the Exchange for Change initiative (USA). Another issue of great interest emerges from the article Learning from Teachers: A Needs Assessment of Faculty in Postsecondary Correctional Education (Weaver et al., 2021), which investigates the experiences of instructors in the Boston University prison education project. In the final recommendations, drawn from a needs assessment of the instructors, the importance of tutor support stands out, particularly to enable teachers to better fulfill their educational mandate. Similarly, Palmer-Cooper (2018) discusses the role of external faculty in adapting educational materials and delivery methods for incarcerated students who lack access to digital learning environments. In this context, the involvement of external tutors becomes essential in overcoming logistical barriers, providing one-on-one support via telephone and written feedback. External academic engagement helps maintain educational continuity and rigor, despite the institutional challenges of prison education. Finally, Bakr (2023) emphasizes the centrality of involving students and staff in building a broad, inclusive, and collaborative learning community capable of driving processes of social change.

3.3 *Educational Practices and Modalities*

Regarding educational methods and tools, the literature offers interesting strategies, all aimed at overcoming the barriers imposed by the so-called total institution. These barriers range from the inability to communicate immediately with university structures or peers, to non-attending classes or accessing the internet, as well as the difficulty in obtaining necessary school materials (even just books, handouts, notebooks), not to mention the complete inaccessibility of disciplines or courses that require specialized equipment (laboratories, internships, apprenticeships, etc.). Some of the articles delve into the specifics of material resources: letters or email correspondence to share creative writing texts with peers outside (Moser, 2021) or, in the case of Palmer-Cooper's text (2018), a detailed tutoring protocol structured around distance learning. Without access to the internet or traditional virtual learning platforms, tutors must rely on telephone calls, personalized study materials, and face-to-face interactions to provide academic support. These modalities ensure that students can engage with their studies even in the most restrictive environments. The role of written feedback is particularly important, allowing tutors to maintain a dialogue with students and provide ongoing academic guidance.

As for methodological tools, it is interesting to remark that shared writing, whether autobiographical or not, remains a fertile ground for the development and sharing of artistic, scientific, and transversal skills

(Bakr, 2023; Moser, 2021; Rios, 2021; Wilson, 2023). The writing center model described by Rios (2021) further demonstrates how decentralized tutoring structures can shift the responsibility for learning onto students themselves. By fostering collaborative peer learning, the writing center helps students develop their academic skills while simultaneously building a supportive learning community within the prison. This approach addresses both academic needs and the social isolation experienced by many incarcerated students. In the only experience conducted in a women's section of a North Carolina prison, the teachers involved in the action research highlighted trauma-informed tutoring, emphasizing the importance of training both peer and external tutors to take care of the various traumas of incarcerated individuals attending university. The theme of the training needs of tutors, whether peer or not, is a recurring one: experience and sensitivity alone are not enough. It is necessary to build a supportive approach, oriented towards creating collaborative and transformative study (and life) paths.

4. Concluding remarks

This systematic review of international literature on university tutoring in prisons aims to lay the groundwork for empirical research into the experiences, perceptions, and educational needs of prison university tutors in Italy. However, this analysis provides only a partial perspective: there are numerous highly valuable international experiences, particularly from Latin America (Parchuc, 2015; Umpierrez, 2016; Ichaso, Bustelo, Rubin, 2023) and the UK (Darke, Aresti, 2016), which are not adequately represented within the selection criteria of the most frequently accessed databases in international research. For this reason, efforts to foster international exchanges and build networks of cooperation that enable engagement with experiences beyond these selection criteria and dissemination frameworks commonly employed by digital platforms should be sustained. Moreover, it is crucial to create spaces for dialogue and collaboration that embrace diverse forms of knowledge and practice, ensuring a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the topic.

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